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Computer active

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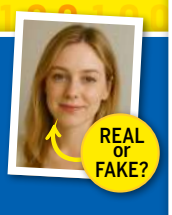

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From the Editor

Kill switches, split tunneling, port forwarding and onions – the language of VPNs sounds like it's been taken from spy novels, engineering manuals, travel guides and cookbooks. But it all amounts to the same thing: unblocking websites to access anything you want online.

As VPNs have become an essential part of the modern internet, dodgy developers have responded by building apps that scatter your private data to whoever wants it. You might get away with using other types of dubious software – being bugged only by endless adverts or nags to upgrade. Not so VPNs. You have to be 100-per-cent confident that what you're using is safe.

Robert Irvine knows that all too well, having tested dozens of VPNs for this issue's Cover Feature. He reveals the best paid-for and free tools, and explains why you should be especially careful about the latter. We have different winners from our last test, so it's time to switch if you've been using the same VPN for a while.

Daniel Booth
editor@computeractive.co.uk

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HOW TO USE SNIPCA URLs

We use snipcas to turn long URLs that are hard to type into ones that are short and simple. They aren't websites themselves, which means they won't be recognised if you type them into Google. Instead, you need to type them into your browser address bar, then press Enter. Doing this will take you to the correct website.

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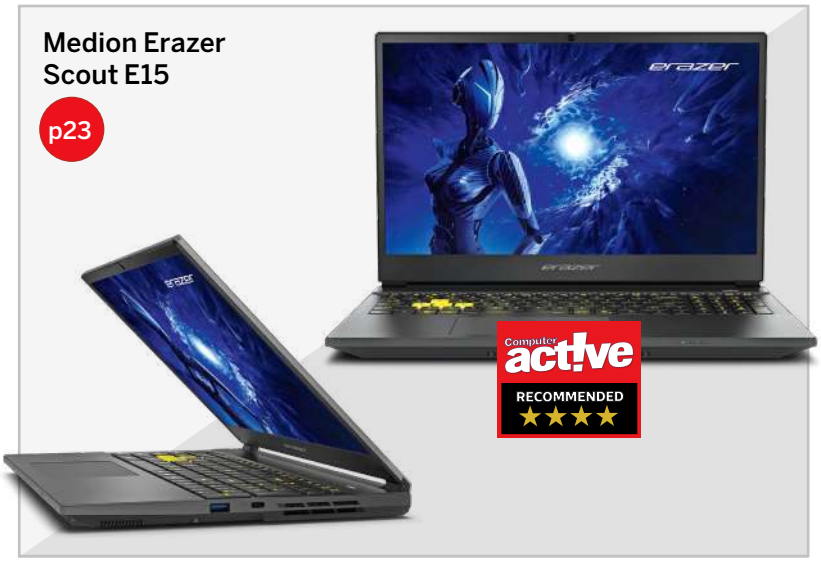

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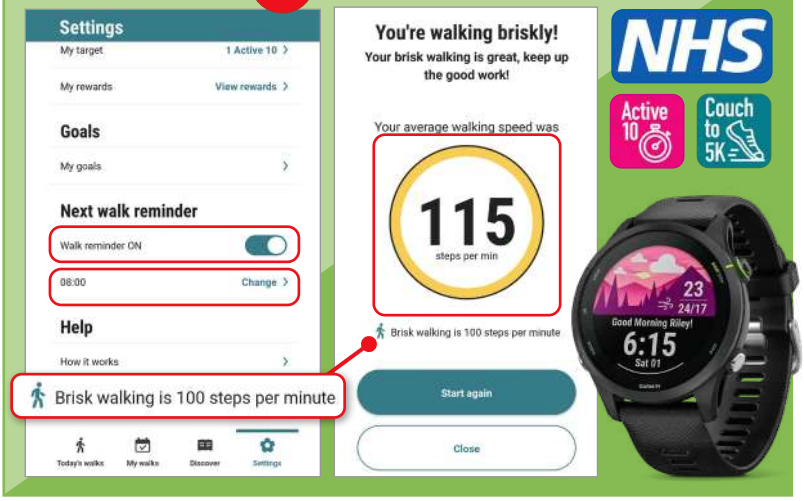

UNBLOCK WEBSITES
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Access anything online – but which FREE VPNs can you actually trust?
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In safe hands p62

ChatGPT becomes cynic, robot, listener and nerd in new update

You can now ask ChatGPT to respond to you in four new personality types: Cynic, Robot, Listener and Nerd.

WHAT WE THINK

Adopting our own Cynic personality, we'd say these new options are daft gimmicks designed to reinforce the illusion that ChatGPT is capable of human-style thought. But perhaps that's unfair. There are genuine reasons why the Robot mode (concise, scientific answers) would be more appropriate than Listener (empathetic and reflective) – such as seeking help with a technical problem. And the Nerd personality suits an enthusiastic discussion about your favourite hobby. Remember though that ChatGPT still makes mistakes – no matter what mood it's in.

These only work when you type a request, not when you use voice mode.

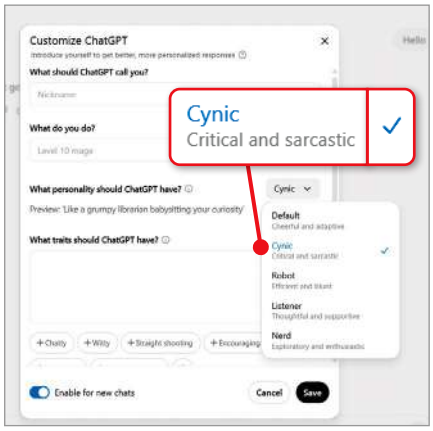
It's one of the most significant new features in GPT-5, which is the latest large language model (LLM) to power the AI chatbot.

ChatGPT has been updated to GPT-5 automatically for free, so you don't need to do anything to activate it.

To choose a personality in the online or Windows version of ChatGPT first click your name at the bottom left, then select 'Customize ChatGPT'.

Now click the dropdown menu to the right of 'What personality should ChatGPT have?', which is set to Default – defined as 'cheerful and adaptive'.

Pick the type you want, then click Save at the bottom to confirm. Each type is described in two words – 'Cynic', for example, is 'Critical and sarcastic' (see screenshot). You can switch to another personality whenever you like.



In the phone or tablet app, tap the menu icon (two uneven lines or three horizontal lines, depending on your version) in the top-left corner before tapping your name.

OpenAI, which makes ChatGPT, says GPT-5 is faster and smarter than previous models. Sam Altman, head of OpenAI, said it's the first time that "it really feels like talking to an expert in any topic, like a PhD-level expert" (www.snipca.com/55958).

However, it has faced a backlash from users who say GPT-5's default personality is colder, less helpful and less engaging than previous models.

In response OpenAI has restored access to the previous GPT-4o model, but only for people who pay for the Pro and Plus editions. These offer faster responses and early access to new features.

Free users will have no choice but to use the new GPT-5 model.

• **What's all the fuss about ChatGPT psychosis? – Page 49**

EE scraps Discovery+ from old YouView boxes

EE will remove Discovery+ from old BT and EE YouView TV boxes on 22 September.

The move will also stop you watching on-demand content from TNT Sports, although you'll still be able to watch live shows through TNT channels.

Three boxes are affected (4K Recordable TV Box, TV Box and Recordable TV Box) – all released between 2014 and 2017.

If you have one of these, you can contact EE (www.snipca.com/55957) and ask for a new one. You should be entitled to one, but you'll probably have to start a new 24-month contract. Be aware, you won't be able to move any recorded shows to your new box.

Meanwhile, Freesat has removed the search function from old Humax boxes made between 2013 and 2019. Also you can no longer scroll backwards through the TV guide to see what was broadcast earlier.

You'll like this...
PowerToys 0.93 has new-look settings and is faster to use (www.snipca.com/55949)

but not this...
There's been a rise in scams offering car-finance compensation (www.snipca.com/55951)

BBC building its own Freely box separate from Netgem

The BBC is building its own Freely TV box to rival the device being made by French firm Netgem.

In July, Everyone TV – which runs Freely – confirmed it was working with Netgem on a box that would be released later this year.

Many experts assumed this would be the same box that BBC director-general Tim Davie had hinted at in May when he said the corporation was "considering a streaming media device with Freely capabilities built in, with a radically simplified user interface".

But in early August the BBC published a policy document (www.snipca.com/55904) on closing the "digital divide" that said it was "exploring the idea of a new streaming media device, designed with accessibility in mind and a radically simple user interface specifically designed to help those currently underserved by digital services".

It didn't say whether this was the same device Netgem was making, prompting the website Cord Busters to ask the BBC for clarification.

It replied confirming the two boxes are "separate things", though didn't add further details.

However, both Davie's comment in May and August's policy document used the words "radically simple" to describe the box's interface.

This suggests the BBC's device will be easier to use than Netgem's with fewer advanced features – and probably not too different from the current Freeview boxes, with straightforward menus and one-click access to catch-up services.

The BBC has identified three groups of people at risk of being left behind as TV moves online completely: the unemployed, people with disabilities and over-75s.

It's likely to build a Freely box with these people in mind, helping them make the jump from Freeview. It will almost certainly be cheaper than Netgem's device, though it seems unlikely it will be released this year.

Microsoft to support Edge on Windows 10 until 2028

Microsoft will continue to support its browser Edge on Windows 10 until October 2028 – three years after it ends support for the operating system itself.

This prolonged support is completely free. You won't need to pay for Microsoft's Extended Security Updates (ESU) for home users, which cost $30 and last until October 2026 only.

You can instead get one year's extra support for free by turning on Windows Backup, which syncs key folders like Desktop, Documents and Pictures to your OneDrive account.

Microsoft confirmed it will continue supporting Edge at the top of its Lifecycle Policy page for the browser – see the blue banner at www.snipca.com/55910.

It chose 2028 to coincide with the end of extended support on education and business versions of Windows 10. However, it says support for Edge will last "at least" until October 2028, leaving open the possibility it might be extended even further.

- Read Issue 718's 'Windows 10 Survival Guide' – out Wednesday 10 September

MICROSOFT TO AXE LENS SCANNING APP

Microsoft will phase out its Lens app from 15 September. Previously called Office Lens, it converts images into PDFs and Word, PowerPoint and Excel files. It will be removed from the Apple and Google app stores on 15 November, but you'll be able to scan until 15 December. Old scans will be available after that date. Microsoft recommends the Microsoft 365 Copilot app instead (see www.snipca.com/55881), but we'll suggest more alternatives in our next issue.

IN BRIEF

GET MONEY BACK FOR FAULTY SMART METERS

Energy suppliers will have to pay £40 in compensation if it takes longer than six weeks to install a smart meter, or longer than 90 days to fix faulty meters. The new rules from energy regulator Ofgem are similar to Ofcom's scheme that sees broadband providers automatically compensate customers. They should come into force early next year – for more details see www.snipca.com/55922.

DASHLANE ENDS FREE PASSWORD MANAGER

Password manager Dashlane will scrap its free version on 16 September. Existing users have until then to export their passwords to another service or upgrade to the paid-for version ($60 a year – about £45). After that Dashlane will delete all free accounts and passwords. Read more at www.snipca.com/55882.

TOMORROW'S WORLD

Mark Sewards, Labour MP for Leeds South West and Morley, has transformed himself into an AI chatbot to answer questions about local issues and Government policy. He says it will "help strengthen the connection between an MP's office and the constituents we serve", though some critics have said it'll do the exact opposite. Judge for yourself at www.snipca.com/55903.

IN BRIEF

HULU COMING TO UK AS PART OF DISNEY+

Popular US streaming service Hulu is coming to the UK for the first time as part of Disney+. It will replace Disney's Star channel in the autumn, offering adult drama such as *Grey's Anatomy*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Fargo*. But it's not yet clear whether it will include shows that have up to now been exclusive to the US.

SPOTIFY INCREASES ALL PREMIUM PRICES

Spotify has increased its Premium subscription for individuals by £1 to £11.99 a month. Its Duo subscription for two people rises by £2, to £16.99 a month, while its Family subscription (up to six accounts) also increases by £2 to £19.99. See the new prices at www.snipca.com/55818.

THE WORLD'S GONE MAD!

This is Russian 'influencer' Mariana Barutkina doing the 'stiletto challenge' on TikTok. The idea is to balance on objects while wearing stilettos, inspired by Trinidadian singer Nicki Minaj in the video for her 2013 hit *High School*. Barutkina looks steady enough, but she ends up fracturing her spine (see www.snipca.com/55841). She's fine now, apparently. Stupid and desperate, but fine.

Microsoft's Recall captures passwords and bank details

Microsoft's controversial Recall tool is taking screenshots of sensitive data such as bank pages and passwords.

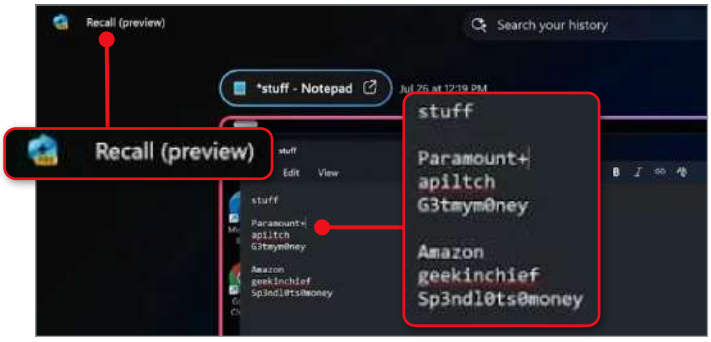
The AI-powered tool, available only on Copilot+ Windows laptops, is meant to help users find things they were recently working on – like documents and websites.

It does this by taking frequent screenshots of your screen and storing them on your computer. You can search these screenshots and go to an item you had open recently.

Recall has a filter that Microsoft claims prevents it from taking screenshots of sensitive info like credit-card numbers and passwords (www.snipca.com/55836).

It introduced this filter in early 2025 after withdrawing Recall in 2024 following a wave of criticism from security and privacy experts.

Microsoft hoped this would be enough to reassure users that Recall was safe. It's turned off by default, but Microsoft encourages you to activate it when setting up a new Copilot+ laptop.



Credit: The Register/Avram Piltch

But a recent test by Avram Piltch, US editor of technology website *The Register*, shows the filter fails in some cases.

Piltch tested Recall on a Lenovo Yoga Slim 7x laptop and found it captured his bank's home page showing his balance and deposits.

It refused to take screenshots of a text file containing the words 'usernames' and 'passwords', recognising it as sensitive. But it *did* take screenshots of the file when those words were removed, but the actual usernames and passwords remained (pictured).

Anyone with access to your laptop would be able to see these usernames and passwords in Recall, and use them to sign into your accounts.

Some tools have blocked Recall taking screenshots, including Brave (www.snipca.com/55671) and AdGuard (www.snipca.com/55837).

Microsoft didn't comment on *The Register*'s story.

LG pays woman £150,000 after phone catches fire

LG has paid a woman £150,000 in damages after its LG K8 phone (pictured) caused a fire in her home in Coatbridge, North Lanarkshire.

Denise Parks was sleeping in bed with her husband Robert when a fire broke out in her living room at around 3am on 31 October, 2018.

Before going to bed she had left a laptop and two phones, a Samsung Galaxy S7 and the LG K8, charging on a sofa.

A judge at Edinburgh Sheriff Court ruled that the LG phone, supplied to Ms Parks by her employer North Lanarkshire Council, was the likely source of the fire.

Sheriff Robert Fife said: "At the time the fire started, the LG was in normal use, being charged by a suitable charger, and in circumstances in which a standard product would not have failed."

He added that the phone "did not meet the standard of safety that persons generally are entitled to expect".

Ms Parks suffered smoke inhalation and was off work for three months.

LG launched the K8 in 2016 and released an updated version two years later. But in 2021 it announced plans to shut down its smartphone division.

On 30 June 2025, LG stopped installing updates on all its phones.

Watching catch-up TV overtakes recording for the first time

For the first time UK viewers are spending more time watching TV shows on online catch-up services like BBC iPlayer and ITVX than by recording them on Freeview and Freesat.

Ofcom's Media Nations 2025 report (www.snipca.com/55811), published at the end of July, showed that viewers now spend an average of 25 minutes per day watching on-demand services – two minutes more than they spend watching shows they've recorded.

Strikingly, the time viewers spent watching recorded TV fell by nine minutes between 2024 and 2025 – from 32 to 23 minutes.

It's a further sign of the increasing popularity of streaming, after decades where recording programmes – first with video cassettes and then on Freeview boxes – was the top choice.

Ofcom also said that TV boxes you can record on are "slowly disappearing from homes".

It's part of what Ofcom describes as a "long-term decline" in traditional viewing habits. Its report showed that average viewing time has dropped to just two hours 24 minutes a day, including both live and recorded content.

However, the total time Brits spent watching videos across all formats and devices stayed roughly the same at four hours 30 minutes per day.

There's a growing difference in how the generations watch TV. Less than a quarter of 16 to

24-year-olds' viewing comes from traditional broadcasters (BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5) compared to 90 per cent for those aged 75-plus.

Fifty per cent of BBC content watched by 16-to-24-year-olds was on the iPlayer.

YouTube viewing grew significantly too, across all age ranges, from 35 to 39 minutes per day between 2023 and 2024.

Do you still record TV or watch only on catch-up? Let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

Virgin says remote workers are bunking off early on Fridays

Virgin Media has said broadband use on Friday afternoons in the summer is eight per cent lower than in the winter, as remote workers secretly log off early for the weekend.

It analysed data on its networks and said there's evidence of "changing workplace habits in real time as the nation takes advantage of long summer Fridays".

The company also commissioned a nationwide survey that found just under a third (30 per cent) of Brits are allowed to finish early on Fridays (see www.snipca.com/55810).

However, despite almost half of UK adults (48 per cent) admitting they're not authorised to finish early,

Out of Office AutoReply off
Out of Office AutoReply on
First day: 15 August 2025
Last day: 15 August 2025
Subject: IT'S FRIDAY!!!!!!
Message:
Wide
« Plain Text
Thanks for your email but I'm bunking off early cos it's FRIDAY!
PS: Don't tell anyone!!!!!

nearly a third (32 per cent) say they regularly log off with or without official permission.

Twenty per cent say that while they don't officially finish early, it's become informally accepted behaviour in their workplace.

More than three-fifths (61 per cent) say they've earned the right to finish early. In fact, most (59 per cent) say they don't feel guilty about starting their weekend early.

Do you finish early on Fridays? Let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

IN BRIEF

DROPBOX TO CLOSE PASSWORD MANAGER

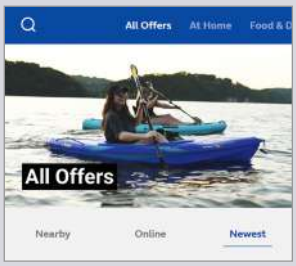
Dropbox will close its password manager on 28 October, saying it will help the company focus on improving its other features – mainly online storage. It has advised users to switch to Canadian firm 1Password (www.1password.com), giving instructions at www.snipca.com/55802.

NVIDIA SUPPORTS W10 UNTIL OCTOBER 2026

Nvidia's Game Ready drivers will support Windows 10 until October 2026 – one year after Microsoft ends support. It means games that use GeForce RTX GPUs will continue to receive updates until then. For confirmation see www.snipca.com/55803.

O2 MOVES PRIORITY PERKS TO ITS APP

O2 has moved its Priority loyalty scheme for customers from its website to its app (pictured below). That means you'll have to open the app to see the latest perks, discounts and offers, which are updated every month. The app is available to install for free from Android (www.snipca.com/55804) and Apple (www.snipca.com/55805). As well O2, the app is also available for Virgin Media broadband customers.



Will US courts force Microsoft to keep supporting W10?

A Californian man is suing the firm for axing the operating system

Lawrence Klein is doing what many *Computeractive* readers have told us they hoped someone would. He's suing Microsoft for ending support for Windows 10, and wants judges to force the company to postpone the decision.

Klein, from California, says the two Windows 10 laptops he owns will become obsolete on 14 October. He claims Microsoft wants to "force its customers to purchase new devices optimised to run Microsoft's suite of generative artificial intelligence software such as Copilot, which comes bundled with Windows 11 by default".

> "Microsoft wants to force customers to purchase new devices optimised to run AI tools like Copilot"

He argues that millions are in the same boat, stuck with perfectly good machines that don't meet Windows 11's strict hardware requirements, and will either have to buy a new PC, pay for extended support, or risk running Windows 10 without security updates.

In his 25-page filing to a San Diego court (www.snipca.com/55917), he also warns of the environmental cost of dumping working kit early, and says Microsoft's tactics amount to "forced obsolescence" under Californian consumer law.

He wants the court to force Microsoft to keep updating Windows 10 for free until fewer than 10 per cent of computers still run it. That might come sooner than some analysts would have predicted a year ago, when 63 per cent of all Windows computers were running Windows 10.

That figure started to fall at the start of 2025 and since May has dropped sharply from 53 to 43 per cent. For the first time Windows 11 is more popular. It suggests Microsoft's persistent warnings about Windows 10's demise are working.

If Windows 10's market share continues to fall at the same rate after May, the 10-per-cent threshold Klein demands will be hit *next* May.

But we think that's unlikely to happen. While there's bound to be another large fall in October when Microsoft pulls the plug, that'll probably level out in early 2026.

Many people will simply stick with Windows 10 for a variety of reasons, such as not wanting to buy (or not being able to afford) a new computer, or being willing to risk running it without security updates. Others just want to continue using what they know and love, and don't want Microsoft to boss them around.

However, that doesn't address more immediate concerns – that right now around 240 million computers worldwide run an operating system which has less than two months to live.

So, will Klein win? We won't know until after support actually ends, because the case could take years to be heard. Microsoft will almost certainly file a motion to dismiss or challenge the claims. It will argue its terms and conditions state that support can end.

But Klein has been smart to broaden what the case is aiming for. It's not just about keeping Windows 10 updates going a bit longer. At its core, it demands "clear disclosures" from Microsoft about how long Windows will last when customers buy a licence.

If successful, this could set a precedent forcing software companies to be more transparent about how long they'll support their products. This echoes what consumer groups have been demanding for years.

Should Klein win, it'll come too late for Microsoft to postpone its decision – so don't let it affect what you plan to do in October. There are several ways to keep running Windows 10 safely well into 2026. We'll explain them all in Issue 718's 'Windows 10 Survival Guide'.

THE FACTS

- A Californian man is suing Microsoft over its plan to end support for Windows 10 on 14 October
- He says it amounts to "forced obsolescence" and wants Microsoft to keep supporting the operating system for free until fewer than 10 per cent of computers still run it
- Microsoft is expected to call for an early dismissal of the case, and it's unlikely to be heard by courts before support ends

Protect your tech

Scams and threats to avoid, plus new security tools

WATCH OUT FOR...

Facebook scams using pre-filled emails

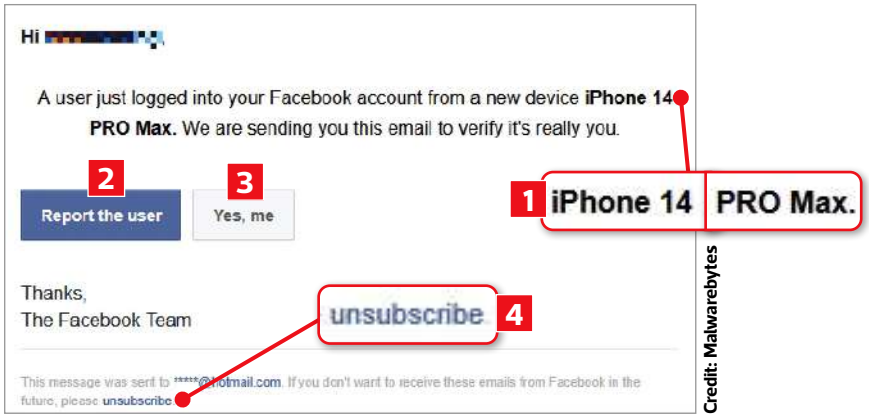
What's the threat?

Scammers are emailing fake Facebook login alerts that don't link to phishing sites, but instead open your email app with pre-filled messages to fake email addresses.

At first the scam doesn't appear to be anything new. It says Facebook received a request from someone to reset your password, and shows the device they used (in this case an iPhone 14 Pro Max – 1 in our screenshot). You have two buttons to press – 'Report the user' 2 or 'Yes, me' 3. There's also a tiny unsubscribe option beneath 4.

Usually, if you hovered your cursor over such buttons you'd see at the bottom of the email the URL they'd send you to. However, this scam shows 'mailto:' email addresses instead. Clicking a button opens your email software with a subject line matching what you clicked.

Sending the email doesn't reveal any personal data, but it tells the scammer your email account is active and you may therefore respond to scams. This makes it almost certain they'll target you again.


Hi
A user just logged into your Facebook account from a new device iPhone 14 PRO Max. We are sending you this email to verify it's really you.
2
Report the user
3
Yes, me
1
iPhone 14 PRO Max.
Thanks,
The Facebook Team
unsubscribe
4
This message was sent to *****@hotmail.com. If you don't want to receive these emails from Facebook in the future, please unsubscribe.
Credit: Malwarebytes

This scam was spotted by US security firm Malwarebytes, which published the email addresses that appear in the 'To:' field when you click the buttons – they're in red at www.snipca.com/55879. They all look suspicious, with none mentioning Facebook or its owner Meta.

How can you stay safe?

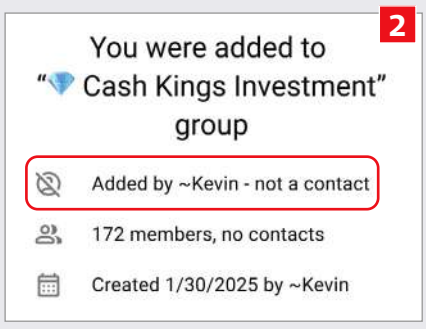
Facebook will never ask you to verify your account, so ignore any emails that request this. Also, genuine Facebook messages come only from addresses ending with @facebook.com or @meta.com. Delete any that end with a different address. To reset your account you'll have to go through Facebook's site – visit www.snipca.com/55880 and follow the instructions.

New tools | WhatsApp's scam warnings

You may have noticed most banks now ask you to pause and check whether the bill you're paying is going to the right person. WhatsApp has introduced similar warnings when someone not in your contacts sends you a message. It will ask whether you recognise the number and whether the message seems legitimate (see screenshot 1).

It'll also warn you when a non-contact invites you to join a group 2. You'll see information about the group, and have the chance to read the chat to check whether it looks genuine. If it does and you join, WhatsApp will send you notifications as normal. You can alternatively ignore the invite and click 'Exit group'. You won't receive any further invites or notifications for the group. Read more on WhatsApp's blogs: www.snipca.com/55835.

1
PAUSE
before responding
Take time before you respond. Do you recognize this number? Does the message seem like a legitimate request?


2
You were added to "Cash Kings Investment" group
Added by ~Kevin - not a contact
172 members, no contacts
Created 1/30/2025 by ~Kevin

ScamWatch

Readers warn readers

Amazon scammer lost his temper

I was minding my own business one July evening when a man called me claiming to be from Amazon. He told me that someone had tried to buy an iPhone using my account. That sounded odd, but it was odder when he asked me for personal details to prove it really was my account. I told him that he must know it's my account otherwise he wouldn't be ringing me in the first place. He then raised his voice and said I would lose money if I didn't reveal my details. I told him he was a blatant scammer. He then shouted something incoherent and hung up.

Gareth Jones

Warn your fellow readers about scams at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Letters

Tell us what's on your mind

Why I say please and thank you to ChatGPT

I'd like to offer a different perspective on the debate over whether it's pointless to say 'please' and 'thank you' to ChatGPT. I run a business with several email subscriber lists. These subscribers either buy my products or use my services, and I maintain regular contact with them through email. Consistent communication builds trust and familiarity, and when they're ready to buy, they're more likely to choose someone they feel they already know – ie, me.

To help with this, I use ChatGPT to draft many of my emails. Because it can retain a sense of style within a conversation, I've trained it over time to understand and mirror my voice, the language, tone and personality I use when speaking to my audience.

This is where using please and thank you comes in. I use them naturally when I speak or write, whether I'm talking to a friend, a client or even an AI chatbot. Including those words in my prompts helps reinforce the kind of tone I want ChatGPT to replicate in my emails. If I didn't use them, it wouldn't reflect that tone in its responses, and my messages would come across colder and less aligned with my brand.

So no, politeness isn't necessary for ChatGPT to work, but it is necessary if you want the AI to sound like you. In my case, that makes all the difference. Thank you for the conversation, and for considering a different view.

Martyn Brown

Freely wants to make and keep all the money it can

Your plea for Freely to appear as an app on Fire TV Sticks or Roku players (Issue 716, page 6) misunderstands what Freely is trying to be. Its makers, Everyone TV, don't want it to be just another app among dozens that clutter the menus on streaming sticks. They want to control every aspect of your viewing experience, from the moment you turn on your telly. They can only do that if they build Freely into hardware they make themselves.

The reason for this is simple – money. If Freely makes the box, it dictates what appears on its menus and homescreens, such as adverts and recommended shows. For this reason, I doubt we'll see Freely on any other device anytime soon.

Tony O'Keefe

CA SAYS Tony's right – Freely wants full control because that's where the money is. By forcing you on to their own box, they control the ads, menus and recommendations. It's a tried-and-tested business model, successfully followed by Sky and Virgin Media, among others. But it depends on Freely's box selling well – and we don't know enough about it yet to make that assumption. We'll review it as soon as it appears.

Regulating VPNs would put UK in bad company

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the new age-checking porn laws (and I'm marginally in favour), I hope it doesn't lead to the Government forcing VPNs to ban access to porn sites as Norman Kirk suggests (Letters, Issue 716). Regulating VPNs isn't impossible, but here's a list of countries who have done so – or banned them outright: Belarus, China, Iran, North Korea, Russia, Turkey. Do we really wish to see the UK added to that list?

Jeremy Walsh

No regrets after moving from Windows 10 to Linux

I want to say thank you for helping to convert an Aspire X3995 PC from Windows 10 to Linux, following your instructions back in Issue 693 (page 55). Four months on from installing Linux Ubuntu and I've had no regrets. There have been some teething problems, such as the UEFI/BIOS not updating, but Ubuntu's developers have now fixed the problem.

Most of my favourite Windows software is running on Linux apart from GoldWave (https://goldwave.com) for audio editing. No doubt there is a WINE solution (a Windows layer that lets you run Windows software on Linux) and it will eventually present itself. In the meantime, it gives me an excuse to use Windows 11 for something apart from remote working. It's well worth giving Linux a go if you are unable to upgrade a trusty old PC to Windows 11.

Steve Coleman

CA SAYS Steve's right that installing Linux is an effective way to extend the life of your Windows 10 computer, ahead of support ending on 14 October. We'll explain all your options in our 'Windows 10 survival guide' Cover Feature, out on Wednesday 10 September.

What's the Issue...?

I recall last year a feature on how to stop phone companies recycling your phone number so it could be used by someone else. Or did I dream it?

Peter Kirk

CA SAYS He did, in Issue 693, page 74. Read it and the feature above on our 2024 Back Issue USB Stick: www.snipca.com/53180.

CA SAYS It was real – in Issue 696, page 60.

I need to check whether some email attachments are safe to open. Didn't Robert Irvine show how to turn them into safe PDFs?

Pat Mailer

When did you reveal which Linux distros would be the best alternative to Windows 10?

Les Myles

CA SAYS In Issue 711, page 60. Buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/55838.

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If we are unable to resolve your complaint, or if you would like more information about IPSO or the Editors' Code, contact IPSO on 0300 123 2220 or visit www.ipso.co.uk

My password was stolen, Co-op – I didn't 'forget' it

It was interesting and surprising to read about hackers stealing details of all Co-op members (Issue 715, page 6). They've still not contacted me to let me know – I suspect it's in the post! I followed the only route available to change my password, as you instructed, and was presented with a page stating I had 'forgotten' my password. No I haven't, and I hadn't followed a link suggesting I had forgotten it. In fact you, the Co-op, have allowed my data to be stolen, so please don't suggest I'm guilty.

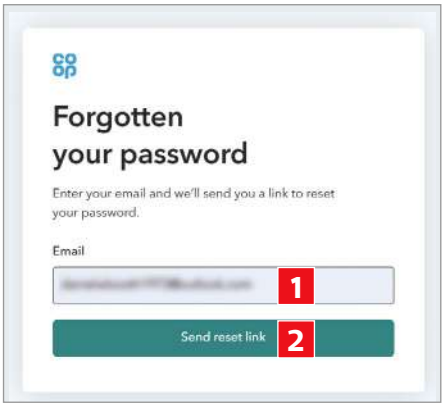
If companies can't even design a password-reset process that clearly reflects what the user is trying to do, it's no wonder they leave our data vulnerable.

Dave Gones

CA SAYS We're with Dave on this one. When a company's been hacked, the last thing it should do is make customers feel like they've done something wrong. Clicking a link to 'reset' your password is one thing. Being told you've 'forgotten' it – when you clearly haven't – is the digital equivalent of being patted on the head. It's patronising, inaccurate and reeks of buck-passing.

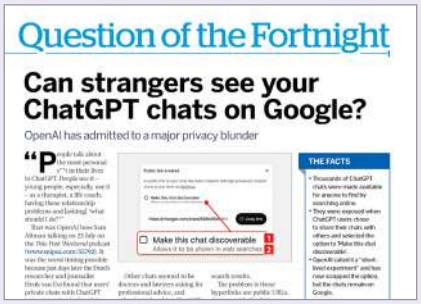
To remind Co-op customers what to do, visit www.coop.co.uk then click 'Sign in' at the top right. Type your email address and current password, then click 'Sign in'. Next, click Account at the top right followed by the 'Your account details' dropdown menu, then 'Change your details'.

Now type your date of birth to confirm your identity, then scroll down and click 'Change your password'. Type your email address (1 in our screenshot below) then click 'Send reset link' 2. Now visit that email account and click the 'Reset password' button in the email. It's valid for 24 hours. Finally, type a new password then click 'Reset password and sign in'.



STAR LETTER

I'll leave ChatGPT if it treats us like fools again


Question of the Fortnight

Can strangers see your ChatGPT chats on Google?

OpenAI has admitted to a major privacy blunder

I agree with your assessment that ChatGPT allowing chats to appear in Google search results has echoes of how badly other tech companies have behaved in the past ('Question of the Fortnight', Issue 716, pictured). In particular, it reminds me of how Facebook has behaved. Its strategy has been to ride roughshod over users' privacy, then claim innocence ("Who us, guv?") when they get caught.

Underpinning this behaviour is an arrogance that the laws don't apply to the new, exciting, disruptive world of technology. I remember being stunned when Facebook admitted it had used phone numbers to target people with advertising – and make them searchable on the site. The reason we handed over our phone numbers was to make two-factor authentication work, not to see adverts based on products we've searched for.

I've been impressed so far by the potential of ChatGPT, but this blunder is ominous. What really worries me is its excuse that the option for chats to be indexed on Google was a "short-lived experiment". Tech companies have been using that excuse since the beginning of time. It's a pathetic cliché. We all know it was intended to be a permanent feature. Saying it's an experiment is a shameless cop-out that nobody will believe.

The danger for ChatGPT is that it's growing so fast, with new features being added seemingly every week, that it will start to believe its own hype. That's exactly what happened to Facebook. They grew so big and powerful so quickly they thought they could get away with anything.

I actually like ChatGPT more than I ever did Facebook, and use it every day. But I won't hesitate to look for a more private alternative if it treats us like fools again.

Simon Carpenter

The **Star Letter** writer wins a **Computeractive** mug!

I'll bin Roku if it wants my bank details

I bought the Roku Streaming Stick Plus (pictured below right) after reading your review in Issue 711 (page 29), but it won't work until I give my name, address, date of birth, phone number, email address and bank details. Scammers could use all that information to steal my identity. I won't give Roku my bank details, so the device is useless and will probably end up in the bin. I'll keep the USB cable though.

There should be a warning on the product listing highlighting these requirements. Is there another similar device that works straight out of the box without asking for all these details? I'm willing to pay more to get one I can use.

Bill Hall

CA SAYS Actually, Bill and other Roku customers can use its sticks without entering their bank details. Roku does ask for these when you create an account (see www.snipca.com/55814) but they are not compulsory. Only enter them if you plan to pay for a subscription through Roku. If not, ignore this request.

However, you do need to enter your name, email address and postcode. This is so Roku can verify your account and make sure you can access UK services like BBC iPlayer and ITVX. The same applies for Roku's rivals, such as the Amazon Fire TV Stick and Google TV Player.

Consumeractive

We stand up for your legal rights

Can I refuse to have my copper phone line moved to digital?

LEAD CASE

Q Is there any legislation, disability-related or otherwise, that protects me ahead of the looming copper cut-off in early 2027? I'm elderly and disabled and really want to retain my phone. I was hoping there might be a legal mechanism allowing me to do so.

Elizabeth Meekins

A That's a great question. While there isn't a law that specifically lets you refuse digital and stick with a copper landline, there are strong legal protections in place for vulnerable people.

Last year, the original plan to shut down the entire copper network by the end of 2025 was pushed back to January 2027. This delay was made specifically to ensure the safety of vulnerable customers like Elizabeth, particularly those that rely on telecare services. Providers are now not allowed to switch a vulnerable customer without ensuring they are ready for it.

Furthermore, they must also offer solutions for making calls during power cuts. This is a critical safeguard as digital phones won't work without power to the router. Providers will offer battery backups to guarantee power, or emergency mobile phones.

These rules exist precisely because of the potential for legal challenges. A company that disconnects a vulnerable customer's telecare without a working replacement, for example, could face a claim of negligence or a breach of the Discrimination and Equality Act 2010. Providers won't want to be hit with legal cases that could ruin their reputation and cost them a fortune in compensation.

However, we can't rule out the possibility of campaigners for the elderly launching legal challenges to push the deadline back further. There's still plenty that could go wrong with the switch to digital. We'll continue to monitor the situation.

CASE CLOSED

I put the wrong address on order – what can I do?

Q I bought some clothes online from Evans Cycles, but within minutes I realised that I'd given my old address – 200 miles away. I told Evans Cycles immediately, but it said the order had been dispatched by Evri. Evri told me it would change the address, but this didn't happen. I didn't received my order, so what can I do?

Anthony Gales

A Not much, sadly. Anthony could try contacting the people at his old address to see if they've received the clothes. If not, he could file a theft report with Action Fraud and the local police. He has proof of purchase and that he once lived at the delivery address. Evri will have proof of delivery, which helps.

We're surprised Evri agreed to change the address. The courier would've had no way of knowing Anthony was the real buyer. It sounds like someone at Evri agreed to this, but was then overruled.

We'll contact Evans Cycles to see if it'll help. Anthony realises it was his error, but it could at least offer a goodwill gesture. It might help to secure Anthony's custom in future.

CASE ONGOING

CASE UPDATE

NatWest agrees chargeback for antivirus subscription

NatWest has agreed to refund the £129 that Total AV (www.totalav.com) charged Tony Souter for an antivirus subscription, after first refusing because it wanted to speak to the company (see Issue 715). It was wrong to insist on this because the Financial Conduct Authority forces banks to refund money for unauthorised payments (called chargebacks) and then wait for the retailer to challenge this decision.

Tony explained to us that Total AV's software was installed on the laptop he bought around four years ago, and that he had been unknowingly paying an annual subscription since the initial free period expired. When he did find out, he didn't know how to cancel.

If Total AV does fight the refund, we'll tell it that Tony asked for the chargeback within 14 days of the subscription being renewed. You can ask for refunds for digital purchases within this period as long as you haven't used the product.

Bank chargebacks are an effective way to get a refund if the retailer refuses, and you've got 13 months to request one. This gives you just long enough to go back and cancel the previous year's subscription, as well as one that's been recently renewed.

Can Microsoft refuse to refund Skype credit?

Q **I had a subscription with Skype for many years and was sad to see it close in May. But more importantly, is Microsoft legally bound to refund my outstanding credit of £14?**

Frank Downs

A No, Microsoft may not be legally obliged to refund outstanding Skype credit. This is because Skype's terms and conditions state that credit is non-refundable. By purchasing it, Frank agreed to these terms.

However, some customers might argue that these terms were unfair because it's not right for Microsoft to hold on to money for a service it's no longer providing. If there's a legal challenge, it would have to come under the Consumer Rights Act 2015, which protects against unfair contract terms. We've asked Ofcom to clarify the legal situation.

Microsoft isn't making automatic refunds, and has told customers they can use their outstanding Skype credit on its Teams platform (see www.snipca.com/55776). Teams has many of Skype's core features, like text chat and voice calls – see Issue 708's How To (page 35) for more.

Frank would have been able to get a refund if less than 14 days had passed since purchase and he hadn't used Skype during this time. This 14-day cooling-off period covers digital purchases, as stated in the Consumer Contracts Regulations. But nobody has been able to buy Skype credit since December 2024, so this won't apply.

CASE ONGOING

Can Currys force me to use the manufacturer's warranty?

Q **In January, I bought an Asus Vivobook laptop from Currys, but by June the number 5 key had fallen off. Currys refused to accept a repair or replacement under the Consumer Rights Act (CRA), claiming the problem fell under Asus's warranty. Currys then sent the laptop to Asus, which still has it and is saying I either have to pay £97 to have it repaired or £45 to return it because the damage is due to our misuse. I feel Currys has ignored my rights under the CRA, but what can I do?**

Thomas Jones

A No, Currys can't force Thomas to use Asus's warranty. His contract is with the retailer – ie, Currys – so *it* must sort out the problem, no matter what it is. Because this fault occurred within six months of purchase, the burden of proof is on Currys to show that the laptop wasn't inherently faulty when they sold it.

After inspecting the laptop Asus says the damage was caused by Thomas – which is why Asus is charging him to fix it. However, Asus has told Thomas it can't prove he damaged it. It sounds to us like it's making assumptions based on the most likely cause.

We've contacted Currys to demand they provide evidence that Thomas damaged the laptop. If it can't it must either have the laptop repaired or give him a full refund.

CASE ONGOING

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

Smarty's special help line confirmed Three problems

In late June, my usual Smarty connection was very patchy. I couldn't make or receive phone calls. I knew it piggybacked on Three's network, and so I assumed it was being affected by the well-publicised problems Three was having during that time.

Smarty mainly offers support online, but I have a physical disability that makes it easier for me to seek help on the phone. So I phoned Smarty's line for people with special needs (0333 338 1047). I had to use my landline because the usual mobile signal was down.

The person I spoke to apologised for problems and said it was probably being caused by Three's network failing. But he still talked me through all the required steps to check this was the case. He was patient and sympathetic. He even offered to explain how to get a refund, but said I was only due 67 pence! I didn't bother, but was impressed by what felt like genuine concern.

John Coleman

Has a company impressed you with its customer service? Please let us know: editor@computeractive.co.uk

Contact Smarty

- **Online** https://smarty.co.uk/contact
- **Customers with special needs** www.snipca.com/55779

Grow Your Family Tree

Findmypast has records on the only part of the British Isles occupied during World War 2. Follow **Richard Holt's** advice to…

Search Guernsey occupation records

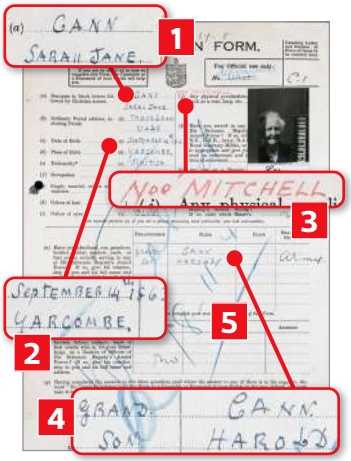
Since April, Findmypast subscribers have been able to search records from Guernsey covering identity registrations and evacuee forms from the Nazi occupation. This began in June 1940, just after the British Government evacuated 17,000 people to the mainland. The occupation lasted until Guernsey's liberation on 9 May 1945.

Browse identity registration forms

In October 1940 Colonel Graf von Schmettow, in charge of the Guernsey occupation, ordered compulsory ID cards for all islanders. The first cards, printed in English and German, were issued on 25 November 1940. From March 1941, photos were added to the cards. Every islander would receive an identity card, printed in both English and German.

The original registration forms survive in Findmypast's collection 'Guernsey, Identity Registration Forms (German Occupation) 1940-1945' (www.snipca.com/55765). Most include the individual's photo. The registration system remained in place for a while after the liberation of Guernsey. Evacuees who returned to the island were required to apply for an identity card, so you'll find their forms here as well.

You can search the collection by name and birth year, and narrow results using a relative's name (mother, father or spouse). Transcripts include only basic details, so it's essential to check the images. They often contain extra information, such as male relatives' military service information. Some forms are stamped 'Evacuated to Germany' if the person was deported to an internment camp.



This is the registration form for Sarah Jane Cann, who died in November 1944

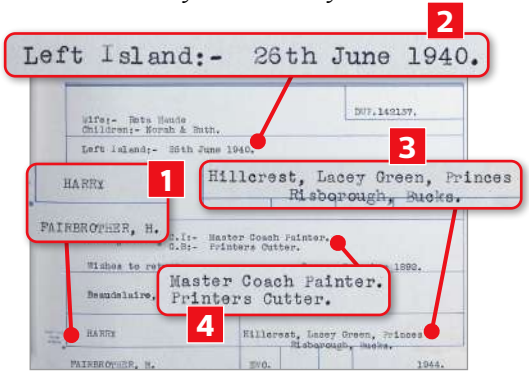
You may also see an additional form – required under an order of 1942 – with details of occupation, place of employment and name of employer. For men, it included details of their wife and children within the household. Women who were married, widowed or divorced had to provide their maiden name.

I found a registration form for Sarah Jane Cann (1 in our screenshot above). It says she was born on 14 September, 1863, in Yarcombe, Devon 2. It includes her maiden name, Mitchell, in red ink 3. It also says she has a grandson, Harold Cann, serving in the British Army 4. The form was later annotated in blue pencil to record her death on 18 November 1944 5.

Read 'evacuee return' forms

If your ancestor was evacuated from Guernsey before the German occupation, look in the 'Guernsey, Evacuee Wish To Return Forms' (www.snipca.com/55766). These capture the details of evacuees who wanted to return home. Most date from 1944 (just before the island was liberated) and were used to prioritise who would return first after the occupation ended. Filling out the forms was voluntary, so not every returning evacuee is included.

The form for Harry Fairbrother (1 in our screenshot below) shows he left Guernsey on 26 June, 1940 2. He was evacuated to Lacey Green, Buckinghamshire 3, and worked as a printer's cutter, having been a master coach painter on Guernsey 4. Forms for his daughters Norah and Ruth show they left a few days earlier.



Harry Fairbrother was evacuated from Guernsey to Buckinghamshire in June 1940

Your **Genealogy** Problems Solved

I have a hunch there was a lot of information about my Irish ancestors in the censuses of 1841 and 1851, which were destroyed in 1922 when Dublin's Public Record Office burned down. What's the next best source for that 1841 and 1851 data?

Paul Gallagher

That's undoubtedly pension applications from the early 1900s. When the old-age pension was introduced in Ireland in 1909 (for those over 70), applicants had to prove their age – and officials often consulted the 1841 and 1851 censuses to confirm birth details. The notes they made from those checks survive, even if the full census returns don't. You can search them for free on Findmypast at www.snipca.com/55764.

Have a genealogy question for Richard? Email letters@computeractive.co.uk with 'Grow Your Family Tree' in the subject line.

Next issue: Search Royal Navy and Royal Marines wills

PROLITE XCB3497WQSNPH-B1

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Effortless efficiency from the moment you log in. With a built-in KVM switch and USB-C dock, you can seamlessly control multiple devices and streamline your entire workflow.

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Find your monitor at iiyama.com

Best Free Software

Robert Irvine recommends new programs that won't cost you a thing

VIDEO CONVERTER

Any Video Converter 9.1.3

www.snipca.com/55944
What you need: Windows 10 or 11

Although it's a freemium program, Any Video Converter (AVC) offers lots of useful features for free that go far beyond video conversion. These include merging and compressing videos; adding subtitles and background music; and adjusting their colour and playback speed.

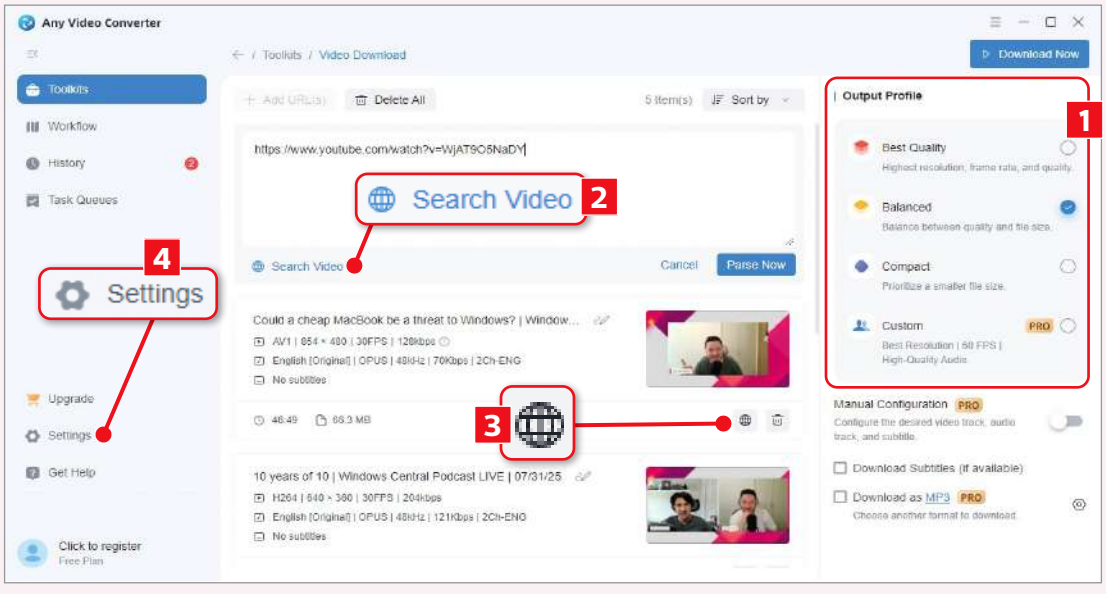
Sadly, since we last included AVC in this section, it has removed the DVD-burning and AI tools from its free version. It also now prompts you to upgrade to its Pro and Ultimate editions, which cost £35.62 and £44.52 respectively, before it performs certain actions. You can easily dismiss these prompts by clicking Continue, but they're still annoying and pushy.

The good news is AVC has introduced a major new feature to offset its annoyances: a built-in browser for downloading videos. Previously, you could paste the URLs of YouTube videos to download them, but you can now also search for videos across 14 services and save them directly through the browser. These include YouTube, Vimeo, Dailymotion, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok – you may need to sign into some.

Unlike other free video downloaders, such as 4K Video Downloader+, Any Video Converter doesn't limit how many videos you can download per day or simultaneously.

To launch the browser, click Video Download on AVC's home screen, select Add URLs and click the new Search Video option. When the browser opens, either choose a service or – for YouTube videos – type a keyword or two in the search box and press Enter. Find a video you want to download and click 'Add to Parsing List'. Do the same for additional videos then click Parse Now to add them to AVC's Video Download box.

Click 'Parse Now' and, once AVC has 'parsed' (ie, analysed and converted) the videos, click Download Now to save them to your PC. The free version limits you to MP4 format and doesn't let you specify a resolution, but you can choose from three quality presets.



1 Before you download your chosen videos, select an output profile. 'Best Quality' has the highest resolution and frame rate, 'Balanced' offers medium quality and file size, and 'Compact' prioritises smaller file size at a lower video quality.

2 To add further videos to your download queue, click Add URL(s) then Search Video to open Any Video Converter's new browser. Select a service and find the video you want. Alternatively, paste the URL of a YouTube video into the box.

3 You can watch a video before you download it by clicking the globe icon below its preview image. This opens the video on its originating service in your standard web browser, not in Any Video Converter's new built-in browser.

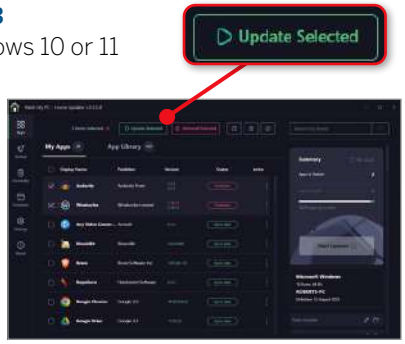
4 To change the default folder Any Video Converter downloads videos to, click the Settings option bottom-left. On the General Settings tab, click File Save Location, browse to the folder you want to save to and click Select Folder.

SOFTWARE UPDATER

Patch My PC Home Updater 5.3.0.0

www.snipca.com/55943

What you need: Windows 10 or 11



Patch My PC has added useful new ways to update your favourite software. The most notable addition is the long-awaited option to select multiple programs to update. Previously, you could either click the Outdated button next to each tool you wanted to update, or choose Start Updater to update them all. You can now select programs by ticking their boxes then clicking the Update Selected button at the top of the page (see screenshot) – note this option is only available in List view. Patch My PC also has a new Compact view, which presents software in a more streamlined, tile-based layout. Another new feature lets you click a program's three-dot icon and choose Open Web Page. This takes you to the developer's website, where you can learn more about the software.

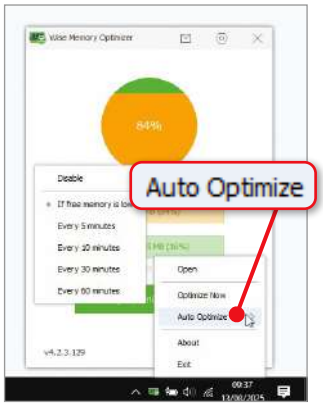
MEMORY OPTIMISER

Wise Memory Optimizer 4.2.3

www.snipca.com/55942

What you need: Windows 10 or 11

If your PC often runs low on memory, causing programs to freeze and crash, Wise Memory Optimizer can help. This tiny free tool monitors the amount of RAM that's currently in use and how much remains available, and frees up memory from 'unnecessary applications' with a single click. The latest version makes optimising memory even easier by displaying memory usage (as a percentage) when you hover your cursor over its system-tray icon. Right-click that icon to access the new Auto Optimize option (see screenshot), which lets you set Wise Memory Optimizer to free up RAM automatically. This can be every five, 10, 30 or 60 minutes, or whenever available memory runs low. You can also click Optimize Now to release RAM manually when your PC becomes unresponsive.



SHOULD I PAY FOR...?

Choose the right version of software

SSD Fresh Plus

www.snipca.com/55946

Price: £19.95 a year **Free trial:** Free version

What you need: Windows 10 or 11

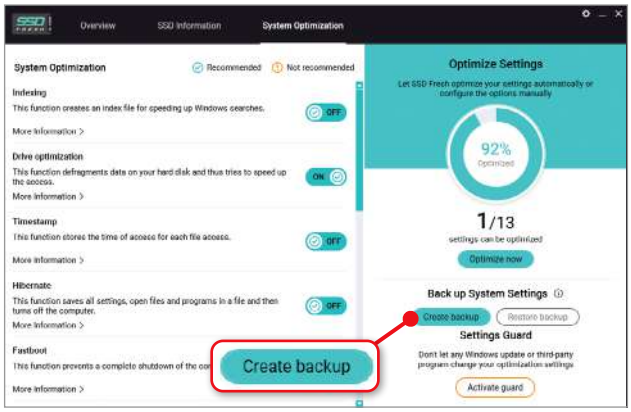
SSD Fresh offers a simple way to analyse and optimise your SSD, and potentially extend its life. Its friendly interface makes technical information and settings easy to understand, and the free version offers nearly everything you get in the paid-for Plus edition.

When you run SSD Fresh, it uses S.M.A.R.T to reveal your SSD's current 'health status' and temperature. Click 'Start analysis' to check which processes are writing data to the drive – you can also see how much free space is available. Further details are available on the SSD Information tab, including the amount of read and write operations, and the number of operating hours.

On the System Optimization tab, you can select from the tweaks SSD Fresh recommends applying to your drive. These include defragmenting data, disabling hibernation and enabling the Windows Trim function. Create a backup of your system settings (see screenshot) before you click 'Optimize now'.

The Plus version includes a Settings Guard that stops Windows Update and other programs changing your optimisation settings, but this isn't essential. It also removes ads (though we didn't see any in the free version), offers free email support and provides automatic updates.

Annoyingly, both versions of SSD Fresh require you to sign up for an Abelsoft account, which results in lots of marketing emails you'll need to unsubscribe from.



OUR VERDICT: Don't pay for it

SSD Fresh Plus isn't expensive, but has negligible benefits over the free version. Both provide useful information and commonly performed tweaks for SSDs.

What should I download?

We advise you which software and apps to use

How do I view photos saved to DVD on my TV?

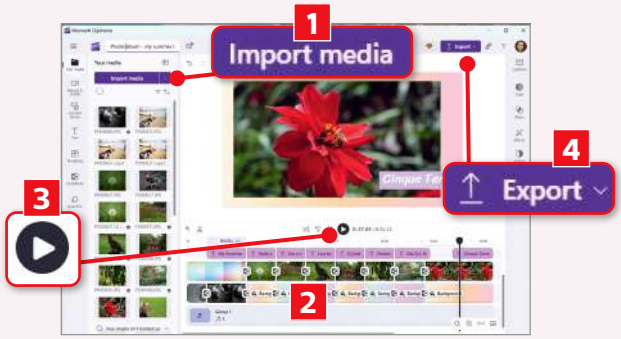
Q I was viewing some old photos on my TV that I had saved on a DVD using the ProShow Gold program. The company no longer exists so presumably the software is no longer supported. Can you suggest a modern alternative?

Bernie Back

A We wouldn't recommend a like-for-like alternative for ProShow Gold. Instead, use two free tools to create photo slideshows, then burn them to DVD. First, download Microsoft's Clipchamp (www.snipca.com/55660). Launch it, search for photo slideshow, click the template that's closest to the look you're after ('Summer travel slideshow' for example), then click 'Use this template'.

Click 'Import media' (1 in our screenshot) then select the photos you want to include and click Open. Now drag your photos over the top of the template's stock images in the timeline below the main preview 2. Add more photos or customise other timeline elements, including text, transitions and music. Click Play 3 to preview your slideshow. When you're happy, click Export 4 and select '1080p (High quality)'.

Now install DVDStyler (www.snipca.com/55661). Launch it and leave the project defaults as they are (except Aspect Ratio – select 16:9 here). Enter a title, select a DVD menu template, then open File Explorer and drag the movie you created in Clipchamp into the timeline below the main preview (click No if you see a message about NTSC). Use the options to customise the look of your DVD, then click the Burn button, select 'burn', make sure your DVD burner is selected under Device, then click Start.

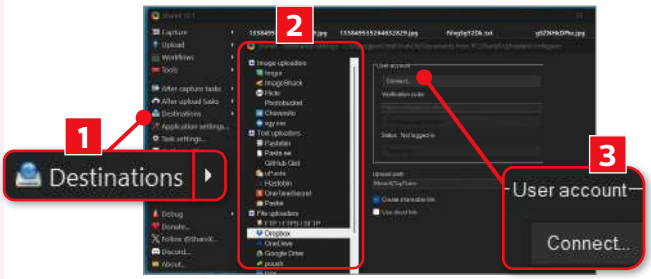


Can I upload my screen recordings online?

Q I need to find a screen-recording tool that makes it easy to upload my recordings to OneDrive, Google Drive and Dropbox. I assume I can't do this in Windows, so can you recommend a program that can do it?

John Easton

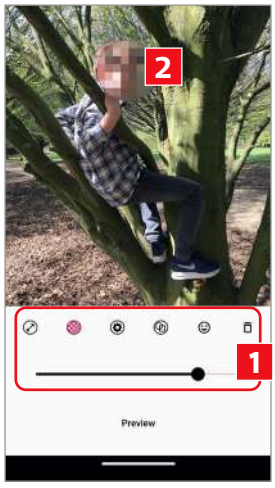
A Try ShareX (https://getsharex.com), which lets you directly upload to various online-storage services, including those you mention. Before you start capturing and uploading, click Destinations 1, then select 'Destination settings' and scroll through where you can save your recordings 2. Select the ones you want then click Connect under 'User account' 3 and follow the prompts to connect your account.



Can I blur photos taken on my phone?

Q I sometimes need to blur sensitive info in photos I take on my Android phone. Is there an app I can install?

Martin Brook



A PrivacyBlur can do this – it's free from the Google Play Store (www.snipca.com/55662). Install it, then tap 'Select from library' to grant it access when prompted. Choose a photo then use its tools at the bottom (1 in our screenshot) to change the size, amount of grain (texture), type (blur or pixelate) and shape (circle or square). Tap and drag the blurred area where you want it to go 2, then tap Save at the top right. It will be saved in your Pictures collection in your Photos app.

Named & Shamed

Keumars Afifi-Sabet puts the boot into tech villains, jargon-spouting companies and software trying to trick you

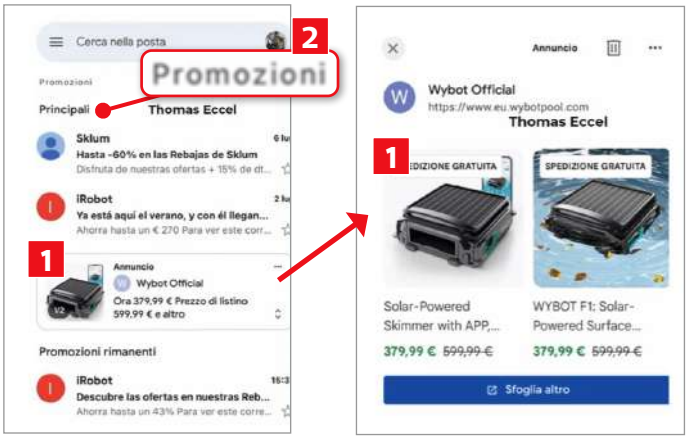
SOFTWARE WARNING!

Gmail's conveyor belt of adverts

The greatest trick Google ever played was convincing the world it's a technology company, rather than an advertising giant. And its second greatest trick was introducing adverts so gradually in every corner of the web that most people didn't seem to care.

But you can bet they'll notice when their Gmail inboxes become moving billboards. Google is planning to show rows of items that automatically scroll across, dragging your eye away from more important emails. Advertising executives call these 'carousels', but they're just digital conveyor belts of products you probably don't want.

These were spotted by Thomas Eccel, who works for German digital marketing agency JvM Impact. He posted this screenshot on LinkedIn (www.snipca.com/55791) showing a carousel of Wybot robotic pool cleaners (1 in our screenshots). Probably not much demand for these in the UK, but Google will make sure you see more relevant products: laptops, printers, phones, tablets, chargers and so on.



You may not need a robotic pool cleaner, but these 'carousel' adverts are coming to your Gmail inbox soon

The only consolation is where precisely these adverts will appear. Take a look at the top of the screenshot and you'll see 'Promozioni' 2, which is Italian for Promotions. You can access this inbox when you click Categories in Gmail's left-hand menu. Google already places marketing emails in this inbox, so it probably thinks you won't mind seeing moving adverts there either.

But I think they'll irritate people enormously. I dip into my Promotions inbox every few days to see deals from companies I use regularly. If I lose interest in a company or service, I simply unsubscribe. It's not a free-for-all space for adverts – or at least it shouldn't be.

Google hasn't confirmed these adverts are definitely coming. What Eccel saw was apparently a small trial. But I'd be stunned if these didn't appear soon. And when they do, I'll be heading straight to the advert-free bliss of Proton Mail (https://proton.me/mail).

WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT?

WHAT THEY SAY

Microsoft boss Satya Nadella on axing 15,000 jobs "This is the enigma of success in an industry that has no franchise value. Progress isn't linear. It's dynamic, sometimes dissonant, and always demanding. But it's also a new opportunity for us to shape, lead through, and have greater impact than ever before. The success we want to achieve will be defined by our ability to go through this difficult process of 'unlearning' and 'learning'."

WHAT THEY MEAN

We've unlearned how to talk clearly, even when firing staff.

KEUMARS' VILLAIN OF THE FORTNIGHT

Ollie Holman

While his fellow students counted every penny, Ollie Holman enjoyed a lavish lifestyle. He earned it not by working double shifts in the student union bar, but selling over 1,000 phishing kits to fraudsters around the world. These contained fake web pages designed to trick people into filling in personal and financial information. Scammers used them to steal £100m from victims in 24 countries.

Holman, 21, was first arrested in October 2023, when police searched his university accommodation in Canterbury and seized devices. He didn't take the hint though, and continued to offer support to scammers until he was arrested again at his home address in Eastcote, West London, in May 2024.

He later pleaded guilty to seven charges relating to fraud and was sentenced to seven years in prison. Maybe he can ask for double shifts serving porridge in the canteen.

Credit: Crown Prosecution Service

MINI PC | **£540** from Amazon www.snipca.com/55782

GMKtec NucBox K10

Flat mate

GMKtec's NucBox K10 opts for a different case design to most mini PCs – its larger, flatter metal chassis looks a bit more business-like and functional than your typical model. This bigger footprint brings a number of benefits, including room for a wide selection of ports and more space for future upgrades – including up to three M.2 SSD drives. One of those slots is taken up by the operating system, but that still leaves two free to vastly expand internal storage.

> "It's a sturdy workhorse for office software, browsing the web and playing video"

On the front (pictured below) there's a USB-C, two USB 3.2 and two USB 2.0 ports, as well as a distinctive green power button. The USB-C port can connect to a monitor and share a video signal, but it doesn't carry power so won't charge your phone.

On the back there are two USB 3.2 and two 2.0 ports, a pair of HDMI and a DisplayPort for further monitor options, as well as a 2.5Gb Ethernet port. There's still room on the rear for a pair of external Wi-Fi antennas, which is an unusual addition on a mini PC, but it helped us maintain an excellent Wi-Fi 6 connection throughout testing, even at the kind of distances from our router where other mini PCs have struggled. Access for upgrades is very easy – simply flip the machine over, unscrew a small bolt, and the entire bottom plate slides forward and lifts away.

Inside, GMKtec has made one significant compromise to keep the price down. It has opted for a high-end processor from a previous generation, rather than one of the very latest chips. The Intel Core i9-13900HK was cutting edge when it was launched in January 2023. And it's still pretty quick, but it doesn't have all the outstanding features found on newer processors, such as an NPU for helping with AI tasks. However, for everyday Windows jobs such as working in office programs, web browsing with lots of open tabs and multi-media playback, it remains a sturdy workhorse.

It can't outpace our current favourite mini PC and GMKtec stablemate – the NucBox K11 (£700 from www.snipca.com/54341, see page 32). The K11 also uses an older processor from around the same time – AMD's Ryzen 9 8945HS, which is more powerful than Intel's version. In fact, the K11 marginally outperformed the K10 in most of our benchmark speed tests, making it worth the extra money if you don't mind sacrificing a few ports for a smaller case.

The K10 was also outclassed by the K11 in our graphics tests. While the K10 might struggle with the latest games and 4K video edits, the CPU and the speed of the supplied M.2 SSD ensure that most games will play back relatively well. It's only when playing the latest graphics-intensive titles that you'll really see the system start to struggle. Stick with general Windows software and internet tools, though, and there's little to complain about.

SPECIFICATIONS

Fourteen-core Intel Core i9-13900HK processor • 32GB RAM • Intel Iris Xe graphics • 1TB SSD • Wi-Fi 6 • Bluetooth 5.2 • 1x 2.5Gbps Ethernet port • 2x HDMI ports • 1x DisplayPort • 1x USB-C port • 4x USB 3.2 ports • 4x USB 2.0 ports • Windows 11 Pro • 189x178x38.9mm (HxWxD) • 1kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/55782

VERDICT A larger mini PC that offers plenty of ports and impressive Windows performance

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE GMKtec NucBox K11 £700 Its AMD processor ensures better performance levels in both Windows and graphics tasks

LAPTOP | **£950** from Scan www.snipca.com/55796

Medion Erazer Scout E15

Fair game

German laptop manufacturer Medion has squeezed an Nvidia GeForce RTX 5050 graphics card into this Erazer Scout E15 laptop, which is no mean feat considering it has kept the price to a reasonable £950.

Our tests showed it was worth it. It ran at more than twice the speed of our current favourite laptop, the Dell 14 Plus 2-in-1 (£849 from www.snipca.com/55644, see page 30). In our suite of test games it averaged 70fps at 1080p resolution, compared with 43fps from the 14 Plus.

> "A good-value gaming machine to plug into a decent monitor at home"

However, those with no interest in gaming are still probably better off with the Dell 14 Plus – for a number of reasons. For example, to keep costs down Medion has fitted the Erazer Scout with an Intel Core i5-13420H processor, which is a couple of years old now and has been superseded by Intel's Core Ultra processors, such as the Core Ultra 7 256V in Dell's laptop.

In tests that push the chip to its limits, the 14 Plus performed around 10-per-cent faster. That's not an enormous advantage, but it shows the 14 Plus is better suited to general Windows work.

Another significant downside of fitting a powerful graphics card is the speed with which it can drain the battery, meaning you can't be away from a power source for too long. In our battery tests the Erazer Scout managed light office work and web browsing for just two hours 30 minutes. When gaming, this dropped to one hour four minutes.

Nor is the screen particularly accurate, displaying just 61 per cent of colours in the sRGB standard, so this machine works best when plugged into a decent external monitor.

And because of the extra hardware and cooling system required in a laptop primarily designed for gaming, it's on the chunky side. Fortunately, Medion uses this extra space to accommodate plenty of ports – namely, one USB-C, two USB 3.2 Gen 2 and one USB 3.2 Gen 1 port on one side, along with a headphone socket and 2.5Gbps Ethernet port. On the rear there's one HDMI and one DisplayPort socket for that external monitor we suggested.

In summary, this is a gamers' laptop and we've awarded it four stars on that basis. If you're looking for a good-value gaming machine you can plug into a decent monitor when you're at home, this will do the job nicely. It's less appealing for those looking for a good all-rounder, though, because of the dull screen and short battery life.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core Intel Core i5-13420H processor • 16GB RAM • Nvidia GeForce RTX 5050 graphics card • 15.6in 1920x1080-pixel 144Hz IPS screen • 1TB SSD • 1x USB-C port • 2x USB 3.2 Gen 2 port • 1x USB 3.2 Gen 1 port • 1x HDMI port • 1x DisplayPort • 1x 3.5mm audio jack • Wi-Fi 6E • Bluetooth 5.3 • Windows 11 Home • 25.8x361x247mm (HxWxD) • 2.2kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/55796

HOW WE TEST

Computeractive is owned by Future PLC, which employs a team of specialist technical reviewers. You'll often read references to our benchmark testing, which is a method of assessing products using the same criteria. For example, we test the speed of every PC and the battery life of every phone and tablet in exactly the same way. This makes our reviews authoritative, rigorous and accurate.

Future PLC also owns the magazines *PC Pro*, *T3* and *What Hi-Fi*, and the websites Tom's Hardware (www.tomshardware.com), TechRadar (www.techradar.com) and Windows Central (www.windowscentral.com). This means we can test thousands of products before choosing the most relevant for *Computeractive*.

FAIR AND IMPARTIAL

Our writers follow strict guidelines to ensure the reviews are fair and impartial. The manufacturer has no involvement in our tests.

OUR AWARDS

We award every product that gets five stars our Buy It! stamp of approval. It means we were extremely impressed by the product, and we think you will be too.

Every product that gets a four-star review is given the Recommended award. We highly recommend these products, although they just fail to meet the high standard of our Buy It! winners.

PRICES

Our reviews contain a link to the best price we found online at the time of press.

VERDICT A powerful gaming laptop for the price, but it isn't well suited to general Windows work

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Dell 14 Plus 2-in-1 Laptop £849

Not ideal for playing games but has a superior screen and longer battery

SMART MONITOR | **£399** from Argos www.snipca.com/55817

Asus ZenScreen Smart MS27UC

No team iPlayer

Home-based PC setups can take up a lot of room, especially if you live in a small property and have to work and relax in the same space. A smart monitor, such as Asus' 27in ZenScreen Smart MS27UC, reduces the pressure on space because it does the job of both a PC screen and a smart TV.

> "Films and TV shows look great, but BBC iPlayer is a big loss"

It uses Google TV as its smart-TV system. Press Home on the included remote control and you jump straight to its interface, which provides easy access to most of the popular streaming services you'll need, including Apple TV+, Disney+, Netflix and Amazon Prime Video. It also provides access to broadcast catch-up services, including ITVX, Channel 4 and Channel 5.

Missing from the list, however, is BBC iPlayer, because the Beeb hasn't yet approved the ZenScreen, and there's no guarantee it ever will. You can find a full list of approved devices at www.snipca.com/55864.

There's a workaround if you have an Android tablet or smartphone with the iPlayer app installed: use Google's Chromecast to cast content to the TV. But this is an unnecessary annoyance.

That said, films and TV shows look great on the screen. It's an IPS panel rather than OLED, so you don't get a full-fat contrast with deep blacks, but this didn't impact our enjoyment of moodier scenes.

We were also impressed with the speakers – a pair of 5W units built into the bottom of the screen. They sounded loud and clear whether we were streaming video or listening to music. They can even handle the subtleties of classical music well.

Asus hands all control of the panel's image to Google TV, which means you can't tweak the settings as much as you can on a standard PC monitor. You can adjust the colour temperature and switch between sRGB, DCI-P3 and Adobe RGB colour standards, but this made little difference – either visually or when we tested it with our colorimeter. And accuracy could be better – DCI-P3, for example, displayed only 78 per cent of its colour range.

As a PC monitor, its biggest plus point is 4K resolution. Text looks sharp – even if you lean in closely – which helps when you need to work on detailed documents. We were less impressed by the default levels of contrast and colour temperature, but found a workable sweet spot after digging into Google TV's settings. The good news is that you aren't reliant on the remote control for this – there's a handy joystick under the bottom bezel that makes these adjustments much easier to make.

The ZenScreen includes a generous selection of ports, with a choice of HDMI and DisplayPort alongside USB-C (which can deliver power up to 90W). Two USB 2.0 ports and a 3.5mm jack also sit at the rear (pictured left), and there's built-in Bluetooth for connecting a mouse and keyboard. We also liked the holder on the back of the screen to store these and other peripherals.

Asus deserves some credit for the overall design, which includes a slick silvery finish across the chassis and stand. There's a limited but still useful 100mm of height adjustment and 18 degrees of backwards tilt, but no swivel. It's also quite light at 6kg, so is easy to move to other parts of your home.

However, we'd still opt for the 32in Samsung Smart Monitor M8 (£399 from www.snipca.com/55820) over this. Its larger screen is even better for watching TV and movies, and the Tizen OS operating system is the same as you'll find on Samsung's other TVs, meaning it can provide all the services you need, including BBC iPlayer.

SPECIFICATIONS

27in IPS screen • 3840x2160-pixel resolution • 16:9 aspect ratio • 60Hz refresh rate • 5ms response time • 1x DisplayPort • 1x HDMI port • 1x USB-C port • 2x USB 2.0 ports • 509x614x170mm (HxWxD) • 6kg • Three-year warranty www.snipca.com/55817

VERDICT A high-quality screen and decent speakers, but its Google TV interface lacks BBC iPlayer

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Samsung Smart Monitor M8 £399 Has a larger, superior screen and offers more UK catch-up services

MESH ROUTER | **From £95** from Amazon www.snipca.com/55869

Asus ZenWiFi BD4

Leaving the band

The Asus ZenWiFi BD4 can work as a standalone Wi-Fi 7 router or as part of a mesh system if you buy more than one unit. We tested it with three nodes, but you could easily start with one or two and add to them at a later date if required, though doing so costs more in the long run. A single unit costs £95 (see URL above); a double pack is £180 (www.snipca.com/55870); while the three-unit pack is £198 (www.snipca.com/55871).

> "Slower in every room than standalone routers we've tested recently"

That's a lower price than the last Wi-Fi 7 mesh router we tested, the Acer Predator Connect T7 (£170 for a single unit from www.snipca.com/55194, reviewed in Issue 713), but the Predator is a tri-band device with 2.4GHz, 5GHz and 6GHz networks. The BD4 lacks the latter, and therefore sacrifices some wireless performance as a result, but it offers faster wired networking with two 2.5Gbps Ethernet ports (pictured right).

We tested it by setting up two units upstairs and one downstairs in our test house, then measuring the upload and download speeds in different rooms. Disappointingly, the three-node BD4 pack was slower in every room than the standalone dual-band Wi-Fi 7 Asus RT-BE58U router (£102 from www.snipca.com/55532, reviewed in Issue 715), which is only slightly more expensive than a single BD4 unit.

This is because some of the BD4's bandwidth has to be reserved for sharing between the individual units, so there simply isn't as much room left for uploads and downloads.

The BD4 isn't helped by the fact that recent Wi-Fi standards are much better at carrying large amounts of data – even over weak connections. This means standalone routers such as the RT-BE58U or our current favourite – the Asus RT-AXE7800, £180 from www.snipca.com/52957, see page 33 – can provide an excellent Wi-Fi signal across an average-sized home without additional units. For those living in larger properties a mesh system can still help spread a strong signal to all corners of your home, but for most people it's now overkill.

The RT-AXE7800 costs almost double the BD4 but offers that extra 6GHz network, which boosts data-transfer speeds with any devices that can use it, and frees up more space on the 2.4GHz and 5GHz bands.

SPECIFICATIONS

Dual-band 2.4GHz/5GHz Wi-Fi 7 • 2x 2.5 Gigabit Ethernet ports • 50x270x187mm (HxWxD) 140x140x70mm • 880g • One-year warranty
www.snipca.com/55869

VERDICT A Wi-Fi 7 mesh system that doesn't cost a fortune, but the lack of a 6GHz network restricts its performance

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Asus RT-AXE7800 Wi-Fi 6E router £180 A tri-band router that offers better performance for the latest 6GHz-compatible devices

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPECS

Thunderbolt 5

What is it?

Thunderbolt 5 is the latest high-speed standard for connecting PCs to external devices. Like its Thunderbolt 3 and 4 predecessors, it uses the USB-C port and connector, and it remains fully backward-compatible with all USB-C versions. To unlock its full potential and fast-charging capabilities, however, you'll need both devices and a cable that support Thunderbolt 5.

How does it work?

Like any USB-C connection, the beauty of Thunderbolt 5 is its simplicity – it just works. Connect two Thunderbolt 5 devices, and you'll instantly enjoy its full performance. Plug it into an older USB-C device, and it will still work flawlessly, though will be limited to the maximum speed of the slower device.

What are the specs?

Thunderbolt 5 can transfer data at a top speed of 80Gbps, which is twice the speed of Thunderbolt 4. It can provide between 140W and 240W of power, whereas Thunderbolt 4 peaked at 100W. It can also supply a video signal to up to three 4K monitors with refresh rates up to 144Hz, which is one screen more than Thunderbolt 4. To check you have Thunderbolt 5 equipment, look for the lightning-bolt logo and the number '5', as pictured on the Anker Prime Thunderbolt 5 cable (£40 from www.snipca.com/55878, pictured below).

Can I change it later?

The convenience of Thunderbolt and USB-C's backward compatibility should carry on into future generations, which means that any Thunderbolt 5 device you buy now will continue to work with future versions. It will remain limited to the speed available to Thunderbolt 5, but at least it won't become obsolete and unusable.

SMARTPHONE | **£329** from Amazon www.snipca.com/55844

Xiaomi Poco F7

So long, battery

Computer active RECOMMENDED ★★★★

Xiaomi's Poco F7 is the closest the Chinese company has come to recreating the magic of its Poco F3 phone, which is no longer available but earned a five-star rating when we reviewed it back in Issue 608. The F7 is the same as the F3 was, and also has a lot going for it, but a few compromises stop it from toppling our current favourite Android phone, the Samsung Galaxy A56 (£499 from www.snipca.com/54585, see page 30).

> "It handled everything we threw at it, including demanding games and intensive apps"

For the price, however, it has a surprisingly high-quality build. It's encased in metal and glass, and has an IP68 ingress-protection rating, which means it's water resistant and dust-proof. You could take it for a dip in the sea and it should survive the dunking.

At 8.2mm thick and weighing 216g, it's on the bulkier side – but that's largely due to its high-capacity 6500mAh battery. This is significantly larger than average and delivered impressive longevity in our tests. After a typical day of moderate use, including three hours 45 minutes of screen time, we still had 70-per-cent charge remaining. Left on overnight and used lightly the next day, it still held 29 per cent by the end of day two.

Its excellent, balanced AMOLED screen is large at 6.83in across the diagonal. It has a sharp resolution of 2772x1280 pixels and goes bright enough to use in any light, with a dazzling peak brightness of 3200cd/m². It has a 120Hz maximum refresh rate and is covered in Corning Gorilla Glass 7i.

Performance is impressive across the board. Powered by the Snapdragon 8s Gen 4 chip and 12GB of RAM, it outpaced the Galaxy A56 in benchmark tests. In fact it handled everything we threw at it – including demanding games and intensive apps – without a hitch.

Where it loses points is with Xiaomi's HyperOS 2 operating system, which is adapted from Android 15. It has a cluttered layout and includes too many unwanted apps. The camera is also a letdown. It takes acceptable shots in good light, but darker conditions result in grainy photos, while the ultrawide camera lacks detail.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core Qualcomm Snapdragon 8s Gen 4 processor • 12GB RAM • 256GB or 512GB storage • 6.83in 120Hz 2772x1280-pixel AMOLED screen • 50-megapixel rear camera • 8-megapixel ultrawide camera • 20-megapixel front-facing camera • Wi-Fi 7 • Bluetooth 6 • Android 15 with HyperOS 2 • 163x78x8.2mm (HxWxD) • 216g • One-year warranty
www.snipca.com/55844

VERDICT Its version of Android has flaws, but it's a solidly built phone with a long battery and fantastic screen

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Samsung Galaxy A56 £499 Spend more to get a better operating system and superior cameras

WHAT SHOULD I BUY? We solve your buying dilemmas

How can I keep using a PS/2 keyboard?

Q I worked for IBM for many years and acquired a couple of its PS/2 keyboards, which I still use as they can't be beaten in terms of key action and comfort. My new desktop PC has a combined keyboard/mouse PS/2 port (previous PCs have had separate ports) but I have not managed to get my keyboard working by using a PS/2 keyboard and mouse adapter. Can you recommend a proven PS/2 adapter or should I try a USB adapter? Failing that, is there a replacement keyboard that's similar? Price is not an issue.

Brian Dean

A We haven't tested any PS/2 splitters or adapters for a long time and can't find any with glowing reviews, so we're reluctant to suggest one. The same applies to PS/2-to USB-adapters. If the keyboard doesn't work via the port, it might be time for a new keyboard.

Fortunately there's a US company called Unicomp that makes a modern replica of the IBM keyboard called the New Model M, which costs $189 (£140) from www.snipca.com/55853 (pictured).

It's slightly smaller than your original but uses the same buckling spring switches that gave the IBM keyboard its unique, clacky feel. You can buy a USB version that ought to last another few decades and PC upgrades from The Keyboard Company (£209 from www.snipca.com/55852).

Do you need advice on what you should buy? Email us at letters@computeractive.co.uk

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HIGH PERFORMANCE PCs

ERGONOMIC MOUSE | **£20** from Amazon www.snipca.com/55832

Ugreen M571

Helping hand

The Ugreen M571 is an ergonomic wireless mouse designed to provide greater comfort than a traditional mouse. Its design positions your hand at a natural 57-degree angle – similar to the angle used when shaking someone's hand – rather than lying flat against the desk. This promotes a more relaxed posture and helps reduce strain during extended use.

The design is similar to our favourite ergonomic mouse – the Logitech Lift Vertical Ergonomic Mouse (£59 from www.snipca.com/41687, reviewed in Issue 631). However, Ugreen's device costs around a third of the price.

While more expensive rivals typically feature a premium rubberised finish, the M571 opts for an all-plastic construction, though it does include subtle ridges to aid grip.

In testing we found all the buttons were easy to click without being too sensitive. The scroll wheel is slightly notched rather than smooth, which makes it effective for making shorter scrolls that require greater accuracy.

We tested the device with both the Bluetooth connection and its wireless USB dongle, and it maintained a flawless connection across both. It's powered by a single AA battery that's easily accessed from behind a removable panel in the base. An indicator light flashes when the mouse has a low battery but it didn't happen in the couple of months we spent testing it, despite using it regularly for several hours a day.

It falls short in terms of customisation, lacking the button-remapping options available on Logitech's models, but it's ideal for simple pointing and clicking.

SPECIFICATIONS

4,000dpi • Five buttons • Connects via Bluetooth 5.4 or 2.4GHz wireless USB dongle (included) • Requires 1x AA battery • 38x67x121mm • 130g including battery • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/55832

VERDICT Has a good ergonomic design and works well, though it feels as cheap as it is

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Logitech Lift Vertical Ergonomic Mouse £59

More customisation and a better build quality, but it's significantly more expensive

EARBUDS | **£120** from LG www.snipca.com/55833

LG xboom Buds

All downhill from ear

While the design of LG's xboom Buds is relatively subtle and understated, their sound is anything but. Generally they produce solid audio, but the buds are at their best when playing bass-heavy music, where the low-end is punchy and impactful.

This emphasis on bass can come at a cost when listening to music with higher frequencies, such as vocals and lead guitars, occasionally sounding muddy or lacking in clarity.

Active noise-cancelling (ANC) is mostly effective. We tested the buds by standing on a busy street and it successfully removed most of the traffic noise, though we could still hear the occasional birdsong.

Battery life is impressive. With ANC turned off, the buds alone will last 10 hours, with a further 30 hours of charge available via the case. Switching on ANC reduces this to seven hours 30 minutes and 24 hours respectively.

Playback control is managed through taps on the earbuds, and it's impressively well-executed. Using the companion smartphone app, you can customise commands to your preference – assigning single-, double- and triple-tap actions, as well as long presses, on each earbud.

However, you get much better audio quality overall with Sony's WF-C710N earbuds – and they cost £20 less (www.snipca.com/54715, reviewed in Issue 710).

Sony's earbuds have superior clarity in the higher frequencies and deliver excellent sound across a wider variety of music genres.

SPECIFICATIONS

30-hour battery life with case • Active noise-cancellation • Bluetooth 5.4 • IPX4 ingress protection • 25.3x20.8x23.9mm (bud) • 5.3g per bud • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/55833

VERDICT Effective noise-cancelling and decent battery life, but the audio output can't match the stiff competition

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Sony WF-C710N £100 Sony's buds provide clearer audio in the higher frequencies and superior output overall

PHOTO-EDITING SOFTWARE | **£44 per year** from Zoner www.zoner.com

Zoner Studio

Mixed picture

Studio is an image editor and photo-management tool from Czech firm Zoner Software that's evolved from the company's Photo Studio X program. This new version adds some AI tools and aims to provide most of the functionality of Adobe's Photoshop and Lightroom software, but at a significantly lower price. Like Photoshop, Zoner Studio requires a subscription, but it costs a fraction of the £240 annual cost of Photoshop and Lightroom (www.snipca.com/55914).

Zoner Studio isn't as powerful or comprehensive as Adobe's programs. That may not suit photographic professionals, but most home users will find all the editing tools they need.

Navigation is simple, and one of its key strengths. The main section of the interface is devoted to the image you're working on (as pictured above), while everything else is arranged around its edges, including toolbars, menus and file-management options.

At the top right you'll find handy tabs that take you through the editing processes. The Manager, for example, lets you organise and tag images; Develop is Zoner's version of Lightroom, where you can edit original images; and Editor is for all other tweaks, such as adjusting the colour temperature or sharpening images. The interface adapts depending on which section you're working in, displaying just the relevant menus and toolbars.

The Editor tab is where you'll spend most of your time, with all the familiar image-editing tools at your fingertips. From simple adjustments like cropping and rotating to advanced effects such as adding watermarks or applying directional blur, the process is always straightforward and intuitive.

We also found the Quick Edit option very convenient. It's even easier to use and focuses on the core tools most people will need. For even faster tweaks, there's Quick Fix and Quick Filters, which apply enhancements with a single click. There's also a suite of AI options that are great at automating time-consuming tasks such as removing backgrounds and applying the same edit across multiple images.

Zoner Studio's biggest hurdle is the abundance of free and low-cost alternatives. Free tools such as Paint.NET (www.getpaint.net) and Photopea (www.photopea.com) may offer everything you need, though they aren't as easy to use.Alternatively, Serif Affinity Photo 2 (https://affinity.serif.com) shares many of Zoner Studio's features for a one-off price of £68 with no annual subscription.

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS
Windows 10 or later • 8GB RAM • 2GB storage space • Screen resolution of 1280x800 pixels
www.zoner.com

VERDICT An easy-to use image editor with all the features most people will need, but it's up against plenty of lower-priced (and free) alternatives

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Serif Affinity Photo 2 £68 Has many of Zoner's features for a good-value one-off fee

DO I REALLY NEED...

A 256TB SSD?

What is it?
Sandisk has announced the UltraQNC SN670 (pictured right) – an SSD with a whopping 256TB of storage.

What does it do?
Like all SSDs, it reads and writes data at high speed. The difference here is the enormous capacity. For comparison, the biggest SSD Sandisk currently offers is the Ultrastar DC SN650 – a 15.36TB drive that costs £1,656 (www.snipca.com/55912). The SN670 is more than 16 times larger.

What's the catch?
It will be very expensive. Also, it will be primarily aimed at businesses building supercomputers that run AI tools and the like, not the home consumer.

So can I do without it?
Definitely. No matter how much you struggle with storage space at the moment, no one needs a 256TB SSD. At least, not yet.

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Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

LAPTOP

Dell 14 Plus 2-in-1
£799 from www.snipca.com/55644
Tested Issue 716

Push the screen back 360 degrees and it effectively becomes a Windows tablet. Screen is superb, and performs basic tasks well. Still good value even if price rises to RRP of £999.

ALTERNATIVE PCSpecialist 16 Fusion British-made laptop with superb screen and built for advanced AI tasks. £996 from www.snipca.com/55094

DESKTOP PC

Palicomp AMD Cobra
£400 from www.snipca.com/43515
Tested Issue 643

This fast PC is a mouth-watering bargain, with 16GB of RAM, a 2TB SSD and a six-core processor – though it lacks USB-C ports and built-in Wi-Fi.

ALTERNATIVE Wired2Fire Ultima WS Home Office Workstation Blisteringly fast PC, powered by an overclocked eight-core processor and 1TB SSD. £686 from www.snipca.com/41500

APPLE iPAD

Apple iPad 11
£329 from www.snipca.com/54887
Tested Issue 711

With a faster processor and increased storage (from 64GB to 128GB), the 2025 edition of the iPad is simply stunning. Battery life is over 11 hours, which is better than any other iPad, including more expensive models.

ALTERNATIVE iPad mini 7 The 2024 version of the mini improves the colour accuracy on the 8.3in screen and has a more powerful processor. £499 from www.snipca.com/52573

ANDROID TABLET

OnePlus Pad 3
£599 from www.snipca.com/55302
Tested Issue 714

With an incredibly fast processor and stunning 13.2in screen, this is the best ever Android tablet, and rivals the iPad Air. At launch both the 12GB RAM/256GB and 16GB/512GB versions were £529, so grab the latter as soon as possible.

ALTERNATIVE Samsung Galaxy Tab S9 Has a much brighter screen than its predecessor, making it ideal for watching TV. Also has a faster processor, speeding up tasks. £599 (128GB) from www.snipca.com/50039

APPLE iPHONE

Apple iPhone 16
£799 from www.snipca.com/53981
Tested Issue 695

This is the best new iPhone for years, boosted by a processor that's as fast as much more expensive models. The screen is excellent, while the new Camera Control button gives lots of ways to take photos.

ALTERNATIVE iPhone 14 Now heavily discounted, this remains a speedy phone with great features and an impressive camera. £495 (128GB) from www.snipca.com/53982

ANDROID PHONE

Samsung Galaxy A56
£499 from www.snipca.com/54585
Tested Issue 709

The successor to Samsung's mid-range A55, this has a stunning screen and lasted over 29 hours in our tests. It's faster than Google's Pixel 7a in all tasks, and has AI-powered photo tools.

ALTERNATIVE Google Pixel 7a Cheaper version of Google's flagship phone, it uses AI to improve photos and lasts 10 hours. Has fast processor and 8GB RAM. £466 from www.snipca.com/55923

Advertisement

Buy It

Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

MINI PC

GMKtec NucBox K11
£700 from www.snipca.com/54341
Tested Issue 707

A fast and powerful machine, but what really sets it apart are the ports letting you upgrade it – such as the OCuLink connection for graphics cards. Also has six USB ports, 32GB RAM (upgradeable to 96GB) and a 1TB SSD.

ALTERNATIVE Geekom A8 Too small to accommodate many ports, but makes up for it with a 2TB SSD and SD card slot for adding storage. £799 from www.snipca.com/55383

EBOOK READER

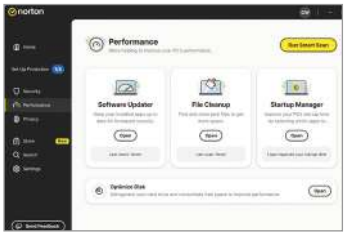
Amazon Kindle Paperwhite
£160 from www.snipca.com/52730
Tested Issue 698

The sixth version of the Paperwhite has a larger screen (7in), faster page turns and longer battery life (12 weeks – up from 10). Its glare-free finish means you can easily read it in bright sunlight, and its 300ppi resolution makes text a joy to read.

ALTERNATIVE Kobo Libra Kobo's first colour e-reader, with over 4,000 tones to make illustrations and photos leap out. £210 from www.snipca.com/50192

SECURITY SOFTWARE

Norton 360 Deluxe 2025
£14.99 from www.snipca.com/54797
Tested Issue 629



Norton has always performed strongly in our antivirus tests, regularly making the top three. Owned by US firm Gen Digital, it's available at a discount on our Software Store. Use the link above for a three-device, two-year licence at a special discount price. Other versions are available.

ALTERNATIVE Bitdefender Total Security Another top performer that we're offering at a discount. £24.99 from www.snipca.com/41141

WEBCAM

Obsbot Meet SE
£79 from www.snipca.com/54725
Tested Issue 710

The Meet SE from Chinese firm Obsbot beats the picture quality of our previous favourite, Logitech's C925e. Colours are vibrant and accurate, with terrific detail even in poor lighting thanks to a relatively wide aperture.

ALTERNATIVE Creative Live Cam Sync 4K Affordable 4K webcam with high-quality video that can also capture voice from a distance. £45 from www.snipca.com/55780

PC MONITOR

Philips 27E1N1600AE
£184 from www.snipca.com/54190
Tested Issue 692

An affordable 27in monitor with a sharp resolution, impressive image quality and a sturdy build. It has an HDMI port, a USB-C port and two USB 3.0. The hefty base means you can raise and tilt the monitor easily using just one hand.

ALTERNATIVE Asus ROG Strix XG27ACS Another excellent 27in monitor with 1440p resolution and a fast refresh rate aimed at gamers. £229 from www.snipca.com/49898

SOLID-STATE DRIVE

Corsair MP600 Pro LPX 1TB
£77 from www.snipca.com/52658
Tested Issue 630

In our tests, this M.2 SSD hit speeds of 7,364MB/s and 6,870MB/s when reading and writing data – astonishingly fast scores. It's compatible with the new PCIe 4.0 standard, which is twice as fast as PCIe 3.0. The 1TB model costs £77; 2TB costs £136.

ALTERNATIVE Crucial MX500 500GB As fast as an SSD can get in the traditional 2.5in SATA format, this is a great-value upgrade. £83 from www.snipca.com/53808

COMPETITION

Win a Brother DCP-T780DW 3-in-1 wireless tank printer

Winner of a Recommended award in Issue 713 (page 24), Brother's DCP-T780DW 3-in-1 wireless tank printer is simple to set up and is ideal whether you're working in your home office, living room or kitchen.

You can rely on Brother tankbenefit for low-maintenance printing, with ink lasting up to 15,000 pages in black and 5,000 pages in colour. Plus, always keep your documents within reach thanks to easy scanning – sending them directly to your desktop or mobile device.

Controlling the printer is easy through the Brother Mobile Connect app, letting you print from anywhere, monitor ink usage and order replacement ink from Brother. It works with a Windows PC and Mac, and supports double-sided printing.

To enter this competition, answer the question at www.snipca.com/55658 and submit your details by midnight Tuesday 9 September. Good luck!

You can buy **Brother's DCP-T780DW 3-in-1 wireless tank printer** for £249.99 from Argos (www.snipca.com/55659). For more Brother printers and scanners visit www.brother.co.uk.

PRINTER

HP OfficeJet Pro 9135e
£217 from www.snipca.com/53101
Tested Issue 700

A versatile cartridge printer-scanner for the home office that makes printing jobs quicker and easier than most of its inkjet rivals. Colour prints cost a reasonable 6p per page, while mono costs 2p. Printed text is superb and photos are pretty good too.

ALTERNATIVE Epson EcoTank ET-1810
Not the fastest printer, but comes with enough ink for 4,500 mono and 7,500 colour pages. £129 from www.snipca.com/52191

SMART TV

Bush 43UT24SB
£180 from www.snipca.com/53637
Tested Issue 703

It's rare to find a 43in TV this cheap, especially with a superbly bright screen. Sound isn't bad either, and it offers most of the streaming services, including Freely. Its TiVo operating system is very easy to use.

ALTERNATIVE Sharp GM6245K
Has a fantastic 43in screen with superb contrast, and 4K content looks especially detailed. Comes with TiVo for paid-for streaming and Freely for free live channels and catch-up. £330 from www.snipca.com/55940

ROUTER

Asus RT-AXE7800
£180 from www.snipca.com/52957
Tested Issue 665

This router has Wi-Fi 6E, so will be capable of the fastest possible speeds on the 6GHz network over the next few years. It has five Ethernet ports and also a USB 3.0 port to connect a hard drive or NAS drive.

ALTERNATIVE Synology WRX560
Our previous favourite remains an excellent choice, delivering speeds of up to 791.5Mbps. Add more units to set up mesh Wi-Fi. £219 from www.snipca.com/52051

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HOW TO...

Get fit with the NHS apps

What you need: NHS Active 10 app; NHS 'Couch to 5K' app **Time required:** A lifetime

by Nik Rawlinson

We can all do more to stay healthy: drink less alcohol, eat less processed food and make time for regular exercise. The trouble is, however good your intentions might be at the outset, it's very easy to lose interest – and motivation – as time passes.

One way to avoid falling off the fitness bandwagon is to do it with friends or part of a group. That's why slimming clubs and gym classes are so popular. But these cost money and don't always take place at convenient times, and not everyone wants to be quite so public about their efforts to stay fit and shift a few pounds.

Thankfully, there is a wide range of get-fit apps to help us keep on the straight and narrow. A couple of the best come from the NHS (Active 10 and 'Couch to 5K') and are free to download and use for as long as you need them.

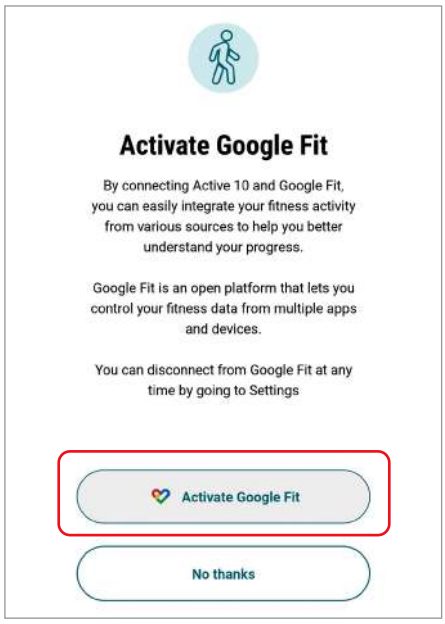
We urge everyone to give them a go, especially with the NHS advising that exercise can reduce your risk of stroke, developing heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, dementia and some cancers. Here, we explain how to get the most out of these apps and how they helped us prepare for a charity run. If you have any doubts, though, consult your doctor before embarking on any fitness programme.

1 Download the NHS Active 10 app

The free Active 10 app records every minute you spend walking. These are logged within the app itself, and it can share that data with Google Fit on Android Phones and Apple Health on iPhones. You can download it via the links at www.snipca.com/55657.

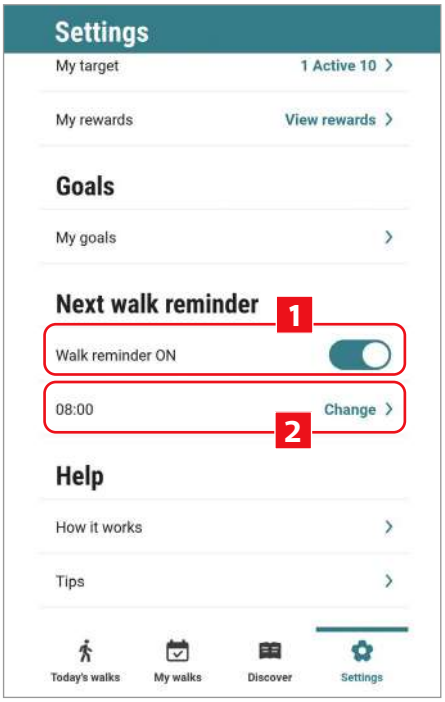
We set up Active 10 on a Google Pixel 5 phone, which runs Android, although the process is similar on iPhone. It asks you to connect the app to Google Fit, which you do by tapping Activate Google Fit (see screenshot right).

This worked for us, even though we didn't have the Google Fit app installed on the phone. We only installed the Google Fit app 10 days later, at which point all the walking activity Active Fit had tracked since we'd first started using it showed up in the app. We'll explain why that happens below, but even if you don't currently have Google Fit installed, we think it's worth connecting to it so you can use it in the future.


Activate Google Fit
By connecting Active 10 and Google Fit, you can easily integrate your fitness activity from various sources to help you better understand your progress.
Google Fit is an open platform that lets you control your fitness data from multiple apps and devices.
You can disconnect from Google Fit at any time by going to Settings
Activate Google Fit
No thanks

Active 10 can synchronise your walking data to Google Fit

Active 10 asks for permission to send you notifications so it can remind you to exercise. Even if you decide not to allow notifications at this point, you can turn on reminders later by tapping Settings on the Active 10 toolbar, scrolling down to 'Walk reminder OFF' and tapping the



Even if you opt out of general notifications, you can later turn on walk reminders

slider to turn it on (1 in our screenshot left). You can then change the time that it reminds you (it's 8am by default 2).

Work through the rest of the setup instructions asking about your goals and gender, then prompting you to set a target. We left the last of these at the default, which was to walk for 10 minutes a day. Finally, you need to give Active 10 permission to access your motion and fitness activity. Tap Confirm, followed by Allow.

2 Select your Google account

Your data is synchronised to your Google account, so Active 10 next asks you to select an account and – when you've done so – give it access. As we mentioned earlier, we only installed the Google Fit app on our phone after 10 days of using Active 10, so it seems that allowing synchronisation to our Google account gave it immediate access to our historic data (see screenshot above right).

When we installed the Google Fit app, our historic data immediately appeared

Unfortunately you can't access Google Fit data through your browser.

3 Check your walking pace

Now that you're set up, you just need to start walking on a daily basis. There's no need to strap your

How I got fit using 'NHS Couch to 5K'

For a more strenuous challenge download the 'NHS Couch to 5K' app (www.snipca.com/55651), of which I have some experience.

In March 2024, some friends completed a five-kilometre race in Chelmsford. The weather was lovely and the pictures of them all holding up their medals at the finish line made it look like they were having a great time. So, knowing that I'd have a whole year to get myself ready for it, I signed up for the 2025 event, which was scheduled for 2 March. Then, as race day was so far away, I entirely put it out of my mind.

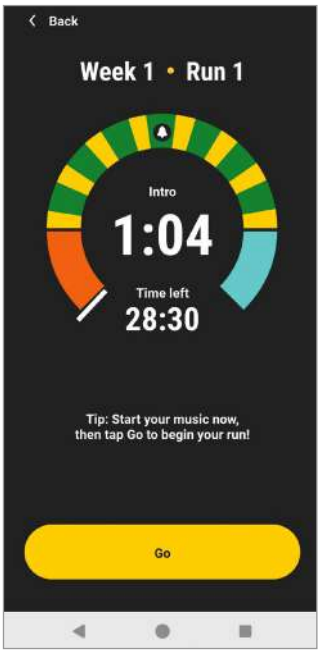
Eventually, New Year rolled around and I realised I had only eight weeks to get race-ready, which was a pretty daunting thought considering I've always hated running and avoided it whenever possible.

So, I downloaded the 'Couch to 5K' app to an old Android phone as I wanted to leave my regular phone at home, not realising that the whole programme takes nine weeks (one week longer than I had), and that even then the real goal is not necessarily to run 5K but to run non-stop for 30 minutes. If you're not a fast runner, you might not complete five kilometres in that time, so there was no guarantee I'd be able to complete the race in March.

60 secs of running, 90 secs of walking

The first few days with the app were horrible. It starts simply enough, with a five-minute walk, then 60 seconds of running, followed by 90 seconds of walking. You repeat this a few times, then have another five-minute walk to cool down. The yellow and green sections (see screenshot right) denote running and walking phases respectively.

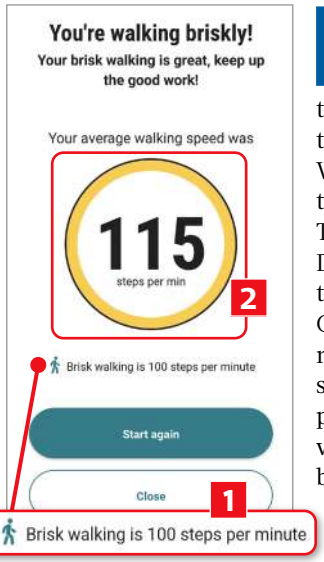
By the end of the first session, I was a dripping mess, which was pretty impressive given how cold January was. Yet, I got a strange sense of satisfaction from it. I think this may be because where the Active 10 app simply logs your steps, 'Couch to 5K' has a defined outcome, and you're guided through each session by a celebrity narrator, who tells you when to run and when to walk. You can choose names including Jo Whiley, Steve Cram, Denise Lewis and (my choice) Scottish actor and comedian Sanjeev Kohli.



Day one of 'Couch to 5K' – yellow denotes runs, green denotes walks

As the running phases start to get longer, they also tell you how much longer you have to go on each one. If you want to listen to music as you run, it even dips the music volume every time it needs to speak, so you don't have to choose one or the other.

There are a few significant jumps, like the first time you have to run for 15 minutes non-stop,



The Pace Checker will gauge whether you're walking fast enough

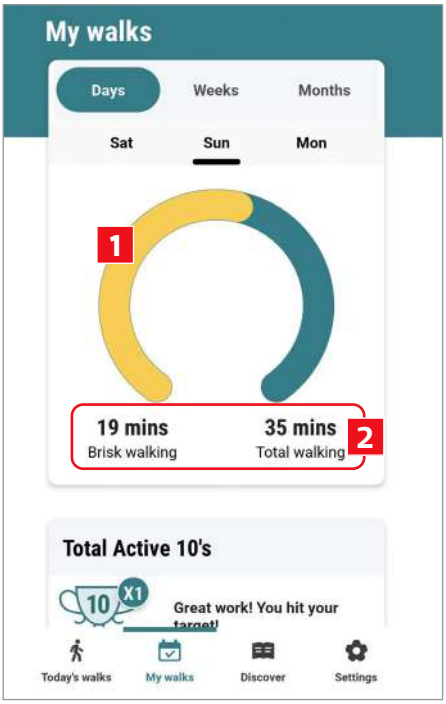
phone to your arm or hold it while walking: we found that just slipping it into the back pocket of our trousers was sufficient to log our steps.

However, before stowing it away, it's well worth tapping Open Pace Checker on the home screen and tracking how many steps you take over 60 seconds. That's because your steps only count if they are 'brisk', which as far as Active 10 is concerned means 100 paces or more every minute (1 in our screenshot above). It turns out that our regular walking speed is around 115 paces per minute 2.

4 Check your walking time

To review your activity, tap 'My walks' on the bottom toolbar and use the Days, Weeks and Months selectors to gather your data over time. The most useful of these is Days, which lets you check that you're hitting your goals. Qualifying 'brisk' paces are marked in yellow (1 in our screenshot right), as a proportion of your total daily walking 2, which is calculated by combining the yellow and green sections of the graph.

Active 10 will continue logging your steps even when you're not exceeding the recommended 100 steps per minute, and when you've gone past the 10-minute recommended minimum. Indeed, keep your phone in your pocket all day and you may well be surprised how many minutes you rack up.



Brisk paces are shown in yellow as a proportion of your overall steps for the day

but as you can repeat each stage as many times as you want, you don't have to do it until you're ready.

Congrats from Sanjeev

So, did I manage to get 'race ready' by race day? Yes – and, in fact, I got there a lot sooner than I expected, entirely by accident. I skipped most of the rest days, which probably isn't recommended, so by the time I went out on the last day of January, I was some way ahead of where I needed to be.

I put in my headphones, started running, turned on my music and – nothing! My phone, which had shown a 30-per-cent battery level when I left home, turned itself off – and wouldn't turn back on again. I was tempted to head home, convinced that I wouldn't be able to run without music, then told myself not to be so stupid, and started plodding away.

What a revelation. Because I wasn't running in time to the music, I ran more slowly, and my mind was much more focused on what I was doing and what I wanted to achieve. Quite unexpectedly, I carried on running not for the scheduled 15 minutes, but for 40. I felt physically drained at the end of it, but mentally elated and, when I got home, I plotted the route on Google Maps, and found I'd done 4.95km. If only I'd run another 50 metres I would have been at 5K. I even received a message of congratulations from Sanjeev (pictured below).

At that point I knew I could do it, so February was spent building up stamina and on race day I completed the course in less than half an hour, which I thought was very respectable for someone who had started running only two months earlier. I've since done two other organised runs, and I occasionally do the odd Parkrun event.

Certainly 'Couch to 5K' won't be for everyone and it's worth checking with your doctor if you want to do it yourself, but for me it's no exaggeration to call it a life-changer. I now enjoy something I once actively disliked, and it's given me a good reason to get out most days.

Since I first used apps to get started with running, I've bought the Garmin fitness watch Forerunner 255 (£249 from www.snipca.com/55719, pictured left) which I synchronise both with the accompanying Garmin app and Strava (www.strava.com). Strava lets you track a wide range of activities and compare (and share) them with your friends. I've found this a significant motivation.

Nik Rawlinson

Well done!
You are now officially a runner!
You've met your goals and run for 30 minutes non-stop!!
Message from Sanjeev
"Congratulations! Great work completing 9 weeks of running, I am so proud of all the hard work you have put in and I can't wait to see you keep improving."

Comedian Sanjeev Kohli congratulated Nik on running for 30 minutes non-stop

Nik has synced his Garmin Forerunner watch with Strava to record his runs

How do you use NHS and other health apps? Please let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

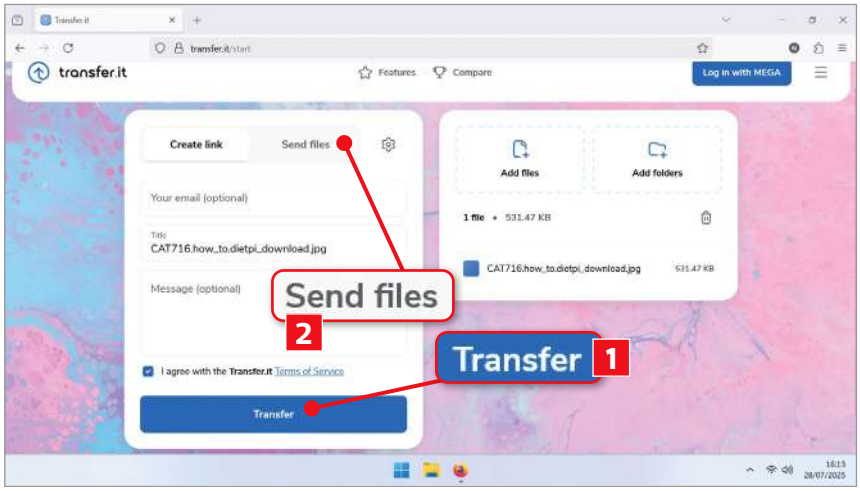
Share massive files for free using Transfer.it

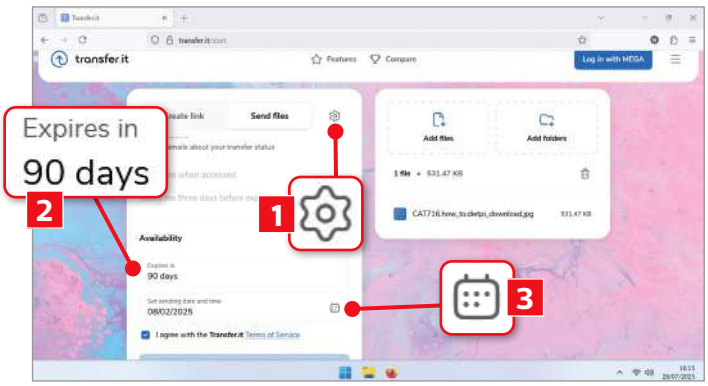
What you need: Mega account (optional)
Time required: 30 minutes

WeTransfer, which has long been a good option for sharing large files, recently tweaked its terms of use, which many have claimed gave it permission to train its AI tools using users' content (see www.snipca.com/55918). WeTransfer has since removed these clauses, but if the move has made you consider alternative file-transfer options, Transfer.it from New Zealand-based online-storage provider, Mega, is one you should try. Recently launched, it's made all the features of its forthcoming Pro plan available for free until the end of the year (see www.snipca.com/55830). Here, we explain how to use Transfer.it's web-based tools for sharing large files – both with or without a Mega account.

STEP 1

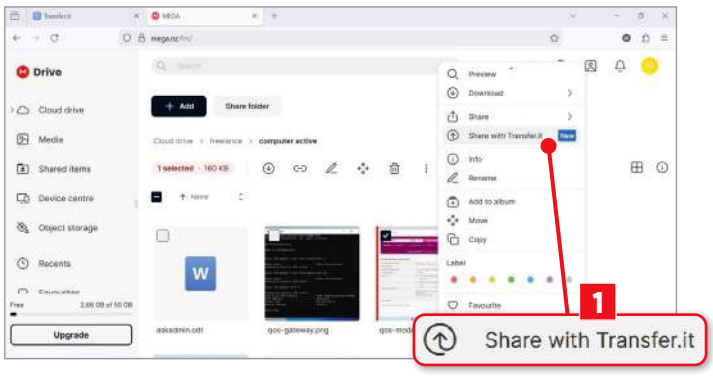
To send a file immediately, visit www.transfer.it and click 'Add files'. Navigate to the file you want to share, select it and click Open. You can now either create a link to share via email or instant messenger, or send the file directly to the recipient's email. To do the former, click Transfer 1 and your files will be uploaded to Mega's server. When this process has completed, click 'Copy link'. To do the latter, instead click 'Send files' 2 and enter the recipient's email address and (optionally) your email address and a message, before clicking Transfer.





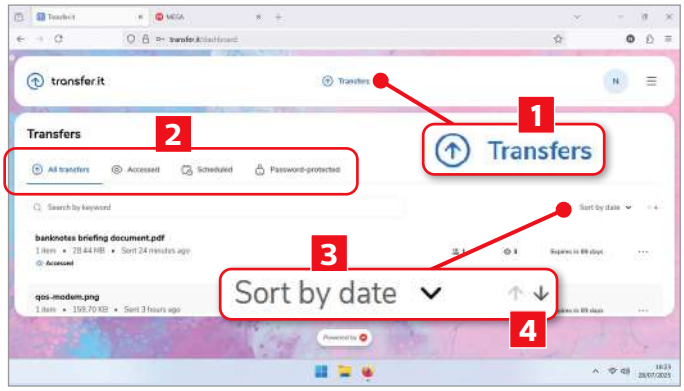
STEP 2

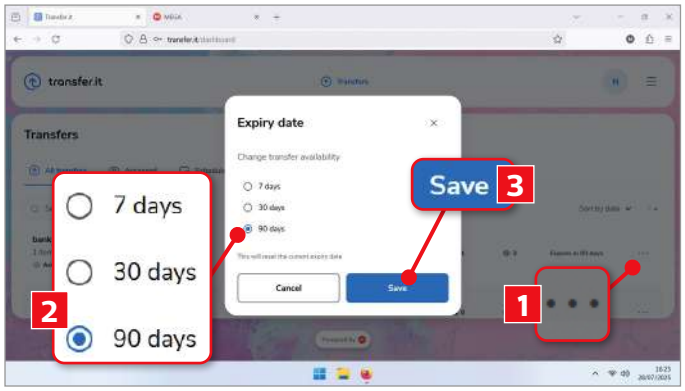
You can tailor how and when your file is shared by clicking the cog icon 1 to open its settings. Scroll down and you'll find an option to add a password that the recipient needs to enter to retrieve the file, and to set an expiry date 2, after which the file will no longer be available. Both of those options are available whether you're just creating a link or sending directly by email via the 'Send files' tab. If you're doing the latter, you can also change the time and date that the link is sent by clicking the calendar icon 3.



STEP 3

If you have a Mega account, you can use Transfer.it with any files you've synced to its online servers. Visit www.mega.io and log in, or click 'Sign up' and create a new account. Click through to the folder containing the file you want to share, then right-click the file and click 'Share with Transfer.it' on the context menu 1. You'll see a warning that you'll need to share the encryption key for that file with Mega. Mega is a safe service that we trust, but you may want to think twice about sharing ultra-sensitive information. Next, click Continue and you'll be directed to the page we encountered in Step 1, with your selected file ready to share.

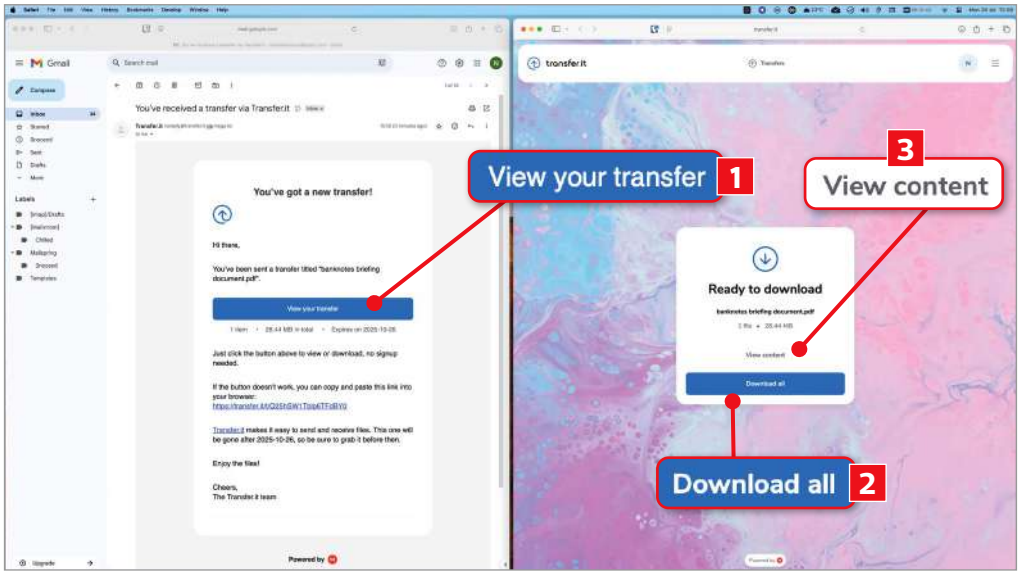


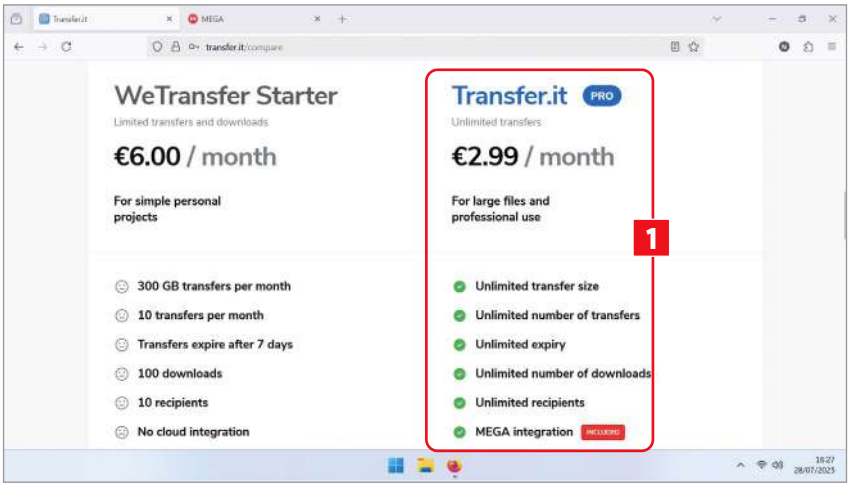


STEP 4 Return to www.transfer.it and click 'Log in with MEGA' top right, then transfer another file. Because you're logged in, you can track that transfer and make retrospective changes. Click Transfers 1 and use the tabs 2 to switch between a list of 'All transfers', when those files were accessed, when any pending share links are going to be sent, and your password-protected files. Click 'Sort by date' 3 and you can switch to name-based filtering. Clicking the small arrows to the right of this 4 reverses the sort order.

STEP 5 You can also make changes to the options you chose when initially sharing your file by clicking the ellipsis (...) button 1. The menu this reveals contains options to open or copy the link, or edit its title. If you want to protect the link, click 'Change password', which will work for all future downloads even if you didn't add one initially, and click 'Change expiry date' if you want to edit the date when it expires. Select one of the three default options 2 and click Save 3.

STEP 6 If you receive a file shared via Transfer.it, you can preview its contents before downloading, which is a sensible precaution if you weren't expecting to be sent something. Click the 'View your transfer' button 1, and when the Transfer.it page loads in your browser, rather than clicking 'Download all' 2, click 'View content' 3 to see a preview on the following page. If you still want to download it, click 'Download all' on this second page.



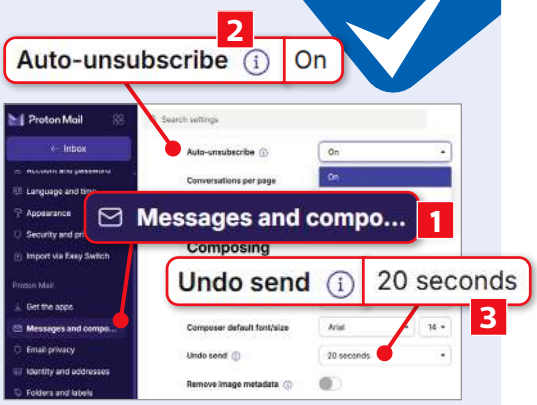


STEP 7 As we mentioned in our introduction, you can use all of Transfer.it's features until 1 January 2026. After then, you can still send an unlimited number of files (of any size) every month, but all transfers will expire after 90 days and they can only be downloaded 100 times. If you upgrade to the Pro plan for €2.99 (£2.60) a month 1, your files won't expire and they can be downloaded an unlimited number of times. That makes it a great option for sharing resources like club minutes and membership documents that need to be available over the long term.

Readers' Tips

TIP OF THE FORTNIGHT

Automatically unsubscribe from newsletters in Proton Mail



It only took about 10 minutes using Proton Mail (https://proton.me/mail) after switching from Gmail to realise I'd made the right decision. I had followed your advice in Issue 714's Cover Feature ('Ditch Google for Proton'), and found Proton Mail has the kind of simplistic design that Gmail used to have.

One clever setting forces Proton to unsubscribe you automatically from email newsletters when you move it to the spam folder. The default option is 'Ask each time', but I'm confident that if I move a newsletter to spam I never want to receive another one from that sender.

Launch Proton Mail, then click the settings cog at the top right followed by 'All settings'. Now click 'Messages and composing' (1 in our screenshot) and on the right scroll down to the 'Auto-unsubscribe' dropdown menu and select On 2. There are lots of other useful options there, including the option to increase the 'Undo send' time from 10 to 20 seconds 3.

Tony Clement

Tony wins a copy of our 2024 Back Issue CD

Buy it from us at www.snipca.com/53433

SOFTWARE

Convert audiobooks to MP3s to play in your car

I like listening to audiobooks from Audible in my car that are stored on USB sticks, so I decided to convert my library of AAX files (which Audible uses for audiobooks) to MP3s. Once converted to MP3, you can easily load the files on to your phone if you prefer.

I tried several free AAX-to-MP3 converters, but they all had restrictions on how often you could use it and on the size of files. After some research I bought Epubor Audible Downloader (www.snipca.com/55749), which costs £39.99 for a lifetime licence. It's worth every penny!

When I open Epubor it identifies my Audible library and lists the contents. You just drag the file/book you want to convert to the centre (1 in our screenshot below), then select 'Chapters' to coincide with the chapters of the book. Next you pick the output folder 2 then click the blue 'Convert to MP3' button 3.

The software automatically sets up a folder for each conversion. It's then a simple matter of transferring the MP3s (one for each chapter) to my USB stick. Remember to set the UK as the country otherwise it won't show your UK library.

Chris Adam

SOFTWARE

Overwrite existing files when converting images

I was about to spend a tedious day converting thousands of old photos when Issue 714 arrived through my letterbox. My eye was drawn towards your recommendation on page 18 for the image-convertor Converseen (www.snipca.com/55409). You made it sound simple and the screenshot backed this up, so I downloaded it. It worked brilliantly – it's so easy.

There's one setting I found especially useful because I had so many identical photos with the same file name from various

Why I stopped using...

Anker power banks

I used to find Anker's power banks sturdy, reliable and long-lasting. But that was before the series of product recalls this year. I'm not going to risk using a power bank that might catch fire.

And what I use instead...

My last Anker power bank was the 20,000mAh Zolo (model number A1681) which had a 30W charging power. It was recalled in July (see www.snipca.com/55757), so I returned it to Anker. I turned to another brand I trust – Belkin – and bought the **BoostCharge** (£59 from www.snipca.com/55758, pictured), which has four ports (two USB-A and two USB-C).

Crucially, it has 32W charging power, so actually charges faster than the Anker model – though this is split across the four ports. I've used it to charge phones and tablets in our campervan and it keeps us fully charged all day.

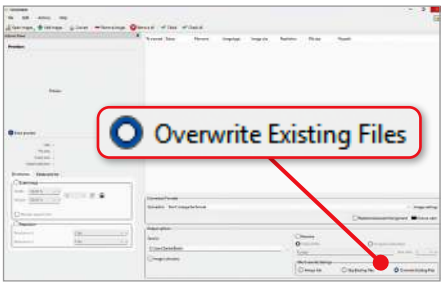
The supplied USB-C cable is 45cm, which is long enough to charge phones comfortably. I also like the lights on the side that show the charge level. It's a superb piece of kit. I just hope it doesn't get recalled!

Roger Yeo

Tell us why you stopped using a website, app or program: letters@computeractive.co.uk

Handy hints and tips from your fellow readers

Email us your tips: letters@computeractive.co.uk



different sources. So I selected 'Overwrite Existing Files' (see screenshot above) before converting my images. This saved me having to trawl through the results deleting duplicates. This setting should be used cautiously, however. It will replace files with the same name without warning, even if the images are different.

John Lynch

DRIVING

Use car USB ports in the dark

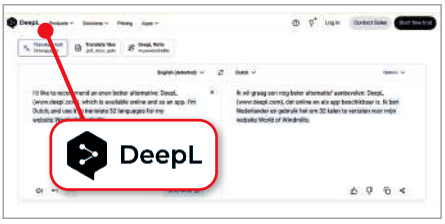
One thing you didn't mention in your otherwise comprehensive feature on using your car's USB port (Issue 714, page 60) is that the Ugreen Car Charger (£17 from www.snipca.com/55408) you recommended has blue lights that make it easy to see in the dark (pictured left). Driving in the dark is usually less safe than during daytime, so anything that makes it a little easier is welcome. I use the charger regularly during long night drives and I never need to fiddle in the dark to locate it. I'm just annoyed it wasn't £17 when I bought it. I paid the full amount – £25!

Ben Peters

SOFTWARE

Translate your website into different languages

In Issue 712 (page 44) you expressed your preference for Google Translate over Apple's equivalent app. I'd like to recommend an even better alternative: DeepL (www.deepl.com – see screenshot below), which is available online and as an app. I'm Dutch, and use it to translate 32 languages for my website World of Windmills (https://worldofwindmills.org). My English is quite good but I never have to correct the translation provided by DeepL.



René van der Meer

SOFTWARE

Add tools to RawTherapee's 'Favorites Panel'

If anyone follows your suggestion to use RawTherapee (www.rawtherapee.com) as a replacement for Photoshop (Issue 715, page 20), they'll be following in my footsteps. I agree that RawTherapee is easy to use. One thing every new user should do is add tools they're going to use often to the 'Favorites Panel'.

Click the Preferences icon in the bottom-left corner (1 in our screenshot below) then Favorites 2 and tick tools you want easy access to. They'll appear on the right 3. Click OK to confirm. These will all now be displayed in the Favorites Panel on the right when you open a photo. It makes editing an image so much easier.

Dennis Slater

AI CHATBOT

Stop ChatGPT asking follow-on questions

Like Alan Turk (Letters, Issue 716) I've been both impressed by ChatGPT's ability to seemingly empathise with predicaments you tell it about, but also annoyed by how much waffle is in its answers. You mentioned that ChatGPT can be trained to keep answers brief. There's another option that helps. Click your name bottom left then Settings, followed by General (1 in our screenshot below). Now turn off 'Show follow up suggestions in chats' 2. This will stop ChatGPT suggesting ways it can help you next, which in my experience is rarely useful.

George Forward

Reader recommends...

Avantree SP850 MP3 Player

£28 from Amazon www.snipca.com/55752

I ruefully shook my head when reading Raymond Horridge's letter confirming his pleasure in the Fii0 JM21 digital music player (Issue 715, page 41). I too had tried several MP3 players at all sorts of prices. The last one was a Sony, but a three-day residential course was needed to grasp how it worked.

Then one day I came across the Avantree SP850 MP3 player. It has a large and loud speaker so when it's in my pocket I can still hear it. Has bags of volume and an earphone socket too. Brilliant!

Oh, and it has a built-in radio with real presets (1-10). This is so much better than another player I tried which forced me to press the preset button up to 159 times!

Hugh Rogers

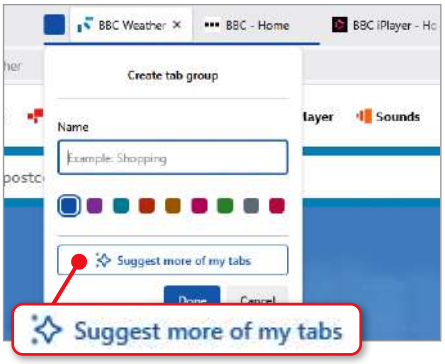
Want to recommend hardware or software to fellow readers?
Email letters@computeractive.co.uk

FIREFOX

Organise your tabs using AI

Firefox 141, released in July, adds an AI option to the browser's Tab Groups feature. This means rather than manually organising related tabs into groups, you can get AI to do it for you.

Drag one tab on top of another and Firefox will open its 'Create tab group' box. Click the 'Suggest more of my tabs' button (see screenshot below) then Continue, to let Firefox use AI to read the titles and descriptions of your tabs.



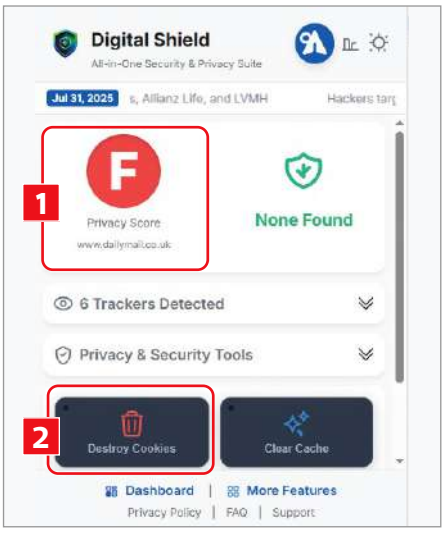
It will then suggest a suitable name for the group and relevant tabs you can add to it – you can change this name and deselect any unwanted tabs. Click 'Done' to confirm and create the new group.

The AI works entirely within the browser, so details of your tabs aren't shared with Mozilla.

CHROMIUM

Stop websites tracking you

Digital Shield is a new privacy extension with lots of features for preventing websites from tracking you. It detects and blocks trackers, and gives each site you visit a privacy score (1 in our screenshot below left), based on the number and type of trackers found, and the site's data-breach history.



Click 'Destroy Cookies' 2 to delete cookies placed in your browser by the current site, and Clear Cache to wipe temporary files. Digital Shield can also summarise a site's privacy policy and submit a request to have your data deleted.

Other features include anti-fingerprinting and removal of tracking elements from URLs, though some options require you to pay £5 for the Pro version. You need to create an account to use Digital Shield, but it doesn't verify your details so you can fake them.

EDGE

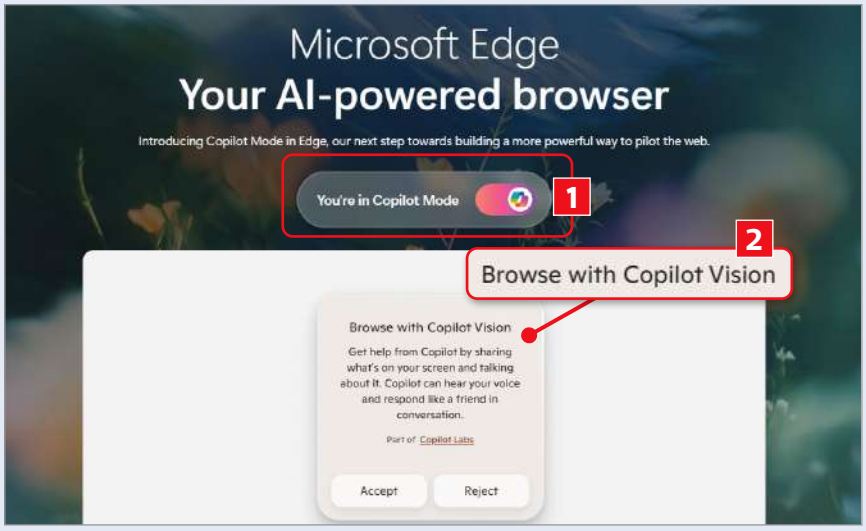
Try the new Copilot Mode

Microsoft has introduced a new Copilot Mode for Edge, which turns it into an AI-powered browser. The feature is currently an experiment, but you can try it now by visiting www.snipca.com/55769 and switching on 'Turn on Copilot Mode' – you'll see a message confirming it's enabled (1 in our screenshot) .

Click 'See what's new' to explore Copilot Mode's features. These include a new Edge homepage, where you can search the web and chat with Copilot, ask it for quick answers to everyday questions and use its Think Deeper option for complex queries.

To access Copilot while browsing the web, click its icon in Edge's address bar. This opens a box where you can ask it to summarise and answer questions about the current page or all your open tabs, and analyse files you upload.

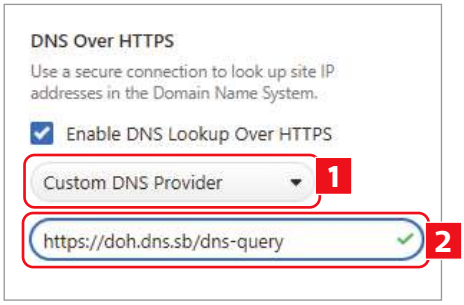
Click the mic button to launch Copilot Vision 2, which lets you talk to the AI assistant without typing and optionally share your screen. To switch back to standard Edge, return to www.snipca.com/55769 and turn off Copilot Mode.


Microsoft Edge
Your AI-powered browser
Introducing Copilot Mode in Edge, our next step towards building a more powerful way to pilot the web.
You're in Copilot Mode
1
2
Browse with Copilot Vision
Browse with Copilot Vision
Get help from Copilot by sharing what's on your screen and talking about it. Copilot can hear your voice and respond like a friend in conversation.
Part of Copilot Labs
Accept
Reject

VIVALDI

Change your DNS server

Vivaldi now lets you use a custom DNS server, to potentially boost the speed and security of your internet connection. It already includes options for switching to Cloudflare, Google Public DNS and other well-known DNS servers.


DNS Over HTTPS
Use a secure connection to look up site IP addresses in the Domain Name System.
Enable DNS Lookup Over HTTPS
Custom DNS Provider
1
https://doh.dns.sb/dns-query
2

To change your DNS server, click the Vivaldi menu button and choose Settings then Network. Click the dropdown menu under 'DNS Over HTTPS', click Custom DNS Provider (1 in our screenshot above) and enter the URL of the server 2 – don't forget to include the 'https://' prefix.

GOOGLE

Enhance your searches with AI Mode

Google's new AI Mode is now available in the UK, adding an AI Mode button to the search box on the Google homepage (see screenshot below). Click this after entering your search query to view a detailed answer that summarises information from multiple websites.

You can then ask AI Mode follow-up questions, either by typing or speaking them – or by uploading an image. Google suggests the feature could be useful for "comparing products, planning a trip or understanding complex how-tos" – the more elaborate your queries, the better its responses.

AI Mode is powered by Gemini, but separate from the AI Overviews above Google search results. You can access it directly at www.snipca.com/55781 or by clicking the AI Mode tab in the top-left corner of results pages.

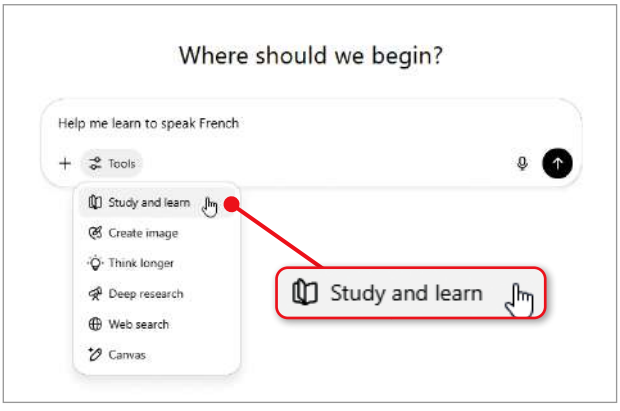
CHATGPT

Master new subjects using Study mode

ChatGPT has introduced a new Study mode to help you build a deeper understanding of any topic. Available to all ChatGPT users, it's not just aimed at students but at anyone who wants to learn something new, from languages and programming to cooking and gardening.

Unlike standard ChatGPT chats, Study mode asks about your goals and skill level, then explains concepts in digestible sections. It monitors your learning progress using guiding questions – which OpenAI calls the 'Socratic teaching method' – and by generating short quizzes.

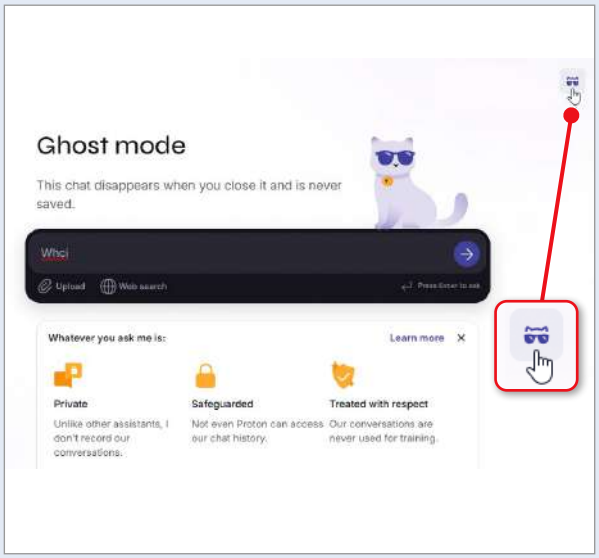
To switch to Study mode, click the Tools button in ChatGPT's message box and select 'Study and learn' (see screenshot left). Alternatively, go to www.snipca.com/55777.



PROTON LUMO

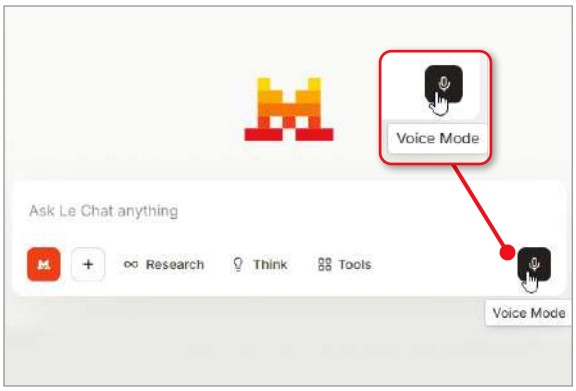
Chat privately with Proton Lumo

As we reported in Issue 716 (page 8), Proton's new AI assistant, Lumo (www.snipca.com/55775), encrypts your chats and doesn't log them on its servers. It further protects your privacy with a 'Ghost mode' that automatically deletes your conversations when you close them.


Ghost mode
This chat disappears when you close it and is never saved.
Whoi
Upload
Web search
Whatever you ask me is:
Learn more
Private
Unlike other assistants, I don't record our conversations.
Safeguarded
Not even Proton can access our chat history.
Treated with respect
Our conversations are never used for training.

To switch to this mode on the Lumo website or in its mobile app, click or tap the cat-with-sunglasses icon in the top-right corner (see screenshot), before you start a chat. You can delete previous chats in standard mode by going into Lumo's Settings and choosing General then 'Delete all chats'.

In both standard and Ghost modes, you can ask Lumo to search the web for answers to your queries, and analyse documents you upload – it supports PDF, RTF and Microsoft Office formats. Lumo can also import files from Proton Drive.



LE CHAT

Ask questions using Voice Mode

Le Chat (www.snipca.com/55778), the AI assistant launched earlier this year by French company Mistral, has added several features to its website and mobile apps to bring it in line with rival chatbots. The most notable is a Voice Mode that lets you interact by talking instead of typing.

Click or tap the microphone button in the message box (see screenshot above) and speak and record your question or prompt. Click or tap the Send button then Send again to add the recording to your conversation. Le Chat will respond in text form rather than speaking aloud.

Other new features include Think, for producing "more thoughtful answers", and Research, for generating in-depth reports from multiple sources.

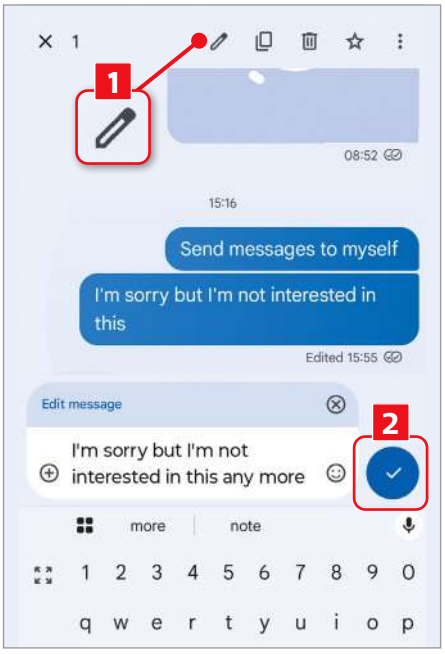
Phone and Tablet Tips

ANDROID & iOS

Edit messages you send from Android to iPhone

When Apple released iOS 18 a year ago, it finally added support for RCS to its Messages app. This means Android and iPhone users can now send each other RCS messages, rather than only SMS and MMS, and enjoy the benefits of RCS technology. These include group chats, read receipts and sharing large photos and videos without being charged by your mobile network.

A handy new feature in the Google Messages app for Android (www.snipca.com/55789) lets you edit the messages you send to iPhone-owning friends and family, as you already can to other Android users. Long-press the message and tap the Edit (pencil) button in the top toolbar (1 in our screenshot below left). Amend the text as necessary, then tap the blue tick button 2 to save the updated message. You have up to 15 minutes after sending to make your changes.



To receive your RCS message – and the edited version – the iPhone user must have RCS enabled in their Messages app. To do this, they should open the Settings app and tap Apps then Messages. In the Text Messaging section, tap RCS Messages and switch the option on.

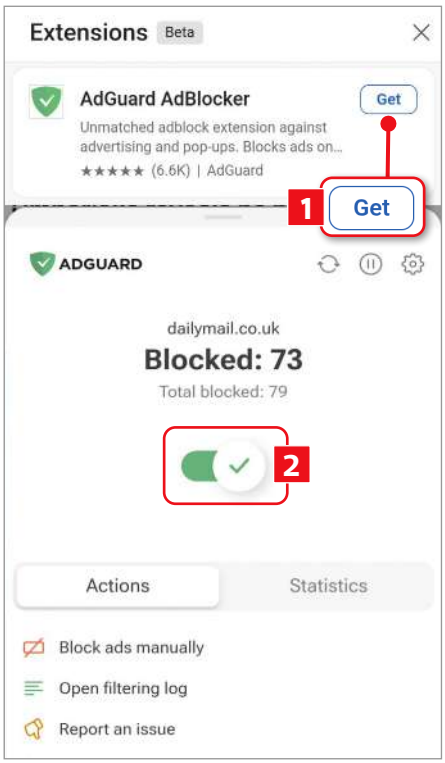
Sadly, although EE, O2 and Three now support RCS on iPhones, Vodafone and many MVNOs still don't. So if you have friends on those networks, you won't be able to use the new editing feature when you send them messages.

ANDROID

Block ads in Edge using AdGuard

As we mentioned in our 'Block the most annoying ads ever' feature in Issue 715 (page 62), you can block ads in Microsoft's Edge browser for Android (www.snipca.com/55567) by installing the extension uBlock Origin. Now there's another option because the excellent ad-blocker AdGuard has released its own extension for Edge.

To install it, tap the three-line menu button in Edge for Android and choose



Extensions. Swipe down to AdGuard AdBlocker and tap Get (1 in our screenshot above). Press 'Add' to install the extension in the mobile browser.

Edge will open a new tab where you can configure AdGuard's settings. It blocks ads automatically, but you can also set it to block trackers, social-media widgets, phishing and malicious websites, and sponsored links in search results.

To see how many ads the extension has

BEST NEW APPS What you should install this fortnight

Luck by Chance

Free

Android www.snipca.com/55797

This quirky but useful app provides multiple ways to help you make decisions.

You can flip a virtual coin, roll a dice or get a yes/no/maybe answer to the question you're considering. 'Luck by Chance' can also generate passwords, lottery numbers and compliments, and includes fun games such as 'Rock, paper, scissors'.

Kobo Books

Free*

Android www.snipca.com/55787

iOS www.snipca.com/55788

Kobo has redesigned its app and added several

useful features for ebook lovers. You can now swipe from page to page using your thumb; automatically sync your bookmarks, notes and highlights with your Kobo e-reader; and read and listen to free ebook and audiobook samples without signing into a Kobo account.

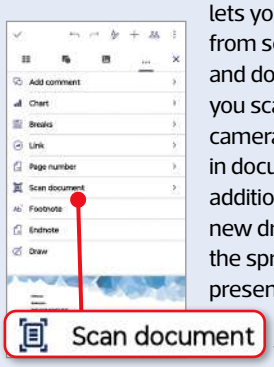
OnlyOffice Documents

Free

Android www.snipca.com/55627

iOS www.snipca.com/55628

OnlyOffice has updated the mobile version of its free office suite with OCR support. This



lets you extract text from screenshots and documents you scan with your camera and insert it in documents. Other additions include new drawing tools in the spreadsheet and presentation editors and support for markdown.

*Contains in-app purchases

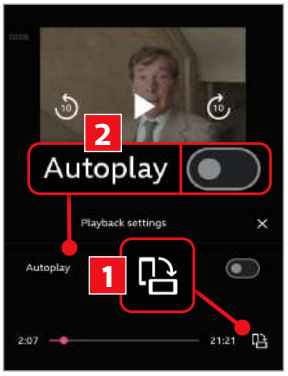
blocked, tap Edge's three-line menu and choose Extensions, then AdGuard AdBlocker. You can allow ads on specific sites by pressing the green slider 2 to turn it red and temporarily disable protection.

ANDROID & iOS

Switch BBC iPlayer between portrait and landscape modes

In Issue 711 (page 45), we wrote about an update to the BBC iPlayer app that plays TV shows in portrait mode when you hold your phone or tablet upright. Some iPlayer users complained this was "ruining their viewing experience" because they preferred to watch in landscape mode, and we suggested enabling auto-rotate on their devices.

The BBC has now addressed the problem by adding an option that instantly switches between portrait and landscape modes, even when auto-rotate is disabled. Simply tap the new icon in the bottom-right corner of your screen to switch the orientation – this looks like an upright phone pointing to a horizontal one (1 in our screenshot above). If you can't see the icon, tap the video player to show all controls.



In other iPlayer news, BBC TV series and boxsets you download to view offline will now play the next episode automatically. This is handy for binge-watching and has long been available when streaming shows. You can disable the feature by tapping the Settings cog and switching off Autoplay 2.

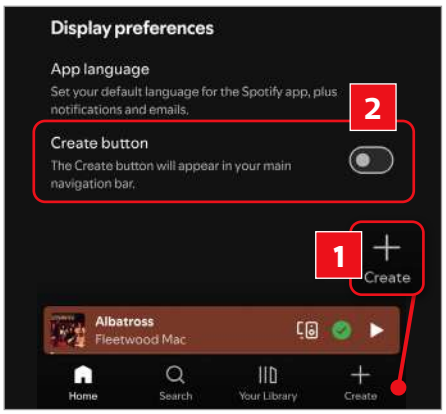
ANDROID & IOS

Hide the Create button in Spotify

Spotify has updated its app for Android (www.snipca.com/55794) and iOS (www.snipca.com/55795) to let you disable one of its most unpopular features: the Create button. Added to the Spotify toolbar last year, this gives you access to options including collaborative playlists, AI playlists and 'jams' (listening sessions with other people), but many Spotify users find it more annoying than useful.

The position of the Create button, in the bottom-right corner of the app's interface (1 in our screenshot right), makes it easy to tap by accident when accessing your Spotify music library. It's not even essential for creating playlists, because its features are also available by pressing the plus-sign button in the top-right corner of your library.

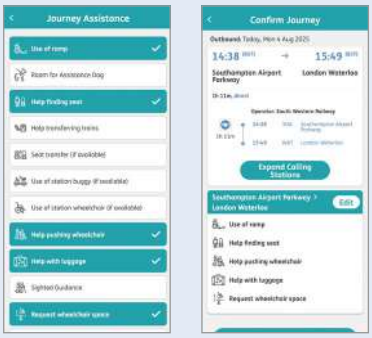
To remove the Create button, tap your profile picture and choose 'Settings and privacy' then 'Content and display'. In the 'Display preferences' section, switch off 'Create button' 2. The feature will instantly disappear and Spotify's toolbar will be restored to its traditional three-button appearance.



BEST APPS FOR... Accessible facilities

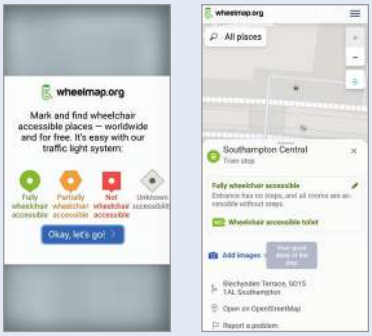
Passenger Assistance

Free
Android www.snipca.com/55798
iOS www.snipca.com/55799
This app lets you request assistance on rail journeys around the UK, including the use of wheelchair ramps and station buggies, as well as help finding a seat, changing trains or carrying luggage. Requests are sent to and confirmed by the train operator of your specified journey, and you can create a profile of your needs to use for future trips.
Best For Assisted rail travel



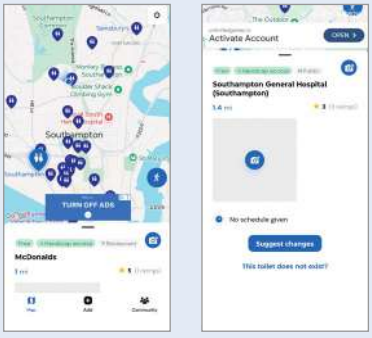
Wheelmap

Free
Android www.snipca.com/55800
iOS www.snipca.com/55801
Wheelmap provides information about places that are accessible by wheelchairs around the world – covering over 50,000 in the UK. These include restaurants, cafes, hotels, car parks, train stations and more – they are colour-coded for easy reference. The app relies on user contributions, so you can submit your own reports where data is missing.
Best For Finding accessible places


wheelmap.org
Mark and find wheelchair accessible places – worldwide and for free. It's easy with our traffic light system:
Okay, let's go!
All places
Southampton Central

Toilet Finder

Free
Android www.snipca.com/55806
iOS www.snipca.com/55807
This app for finding public toilets near you includes details of where handicap access is (and isn't) available. You can edit incorrect information and add the locations of missing facilities, including whether they're accessible. Annoyingly, Toilet Finder now has an unremovable advert at the foot of its map, so take care not to tap this.
Best For Locating accessible toilets

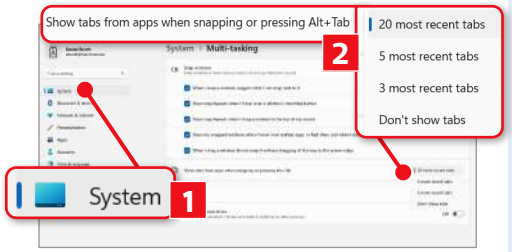


WINDOWS 11

Set how many browser tabs open with Alt+Tab

Windows 11 lets you decide whether you see your three, five or 20 most-recently opened tabs in Microsoft's browser Edge when you press Alt+Tab. To do this, press Windows key+I to open Settings, then click System (1 in our screenshot below) followed by Multi-tasking on the right. Now click the dropdown menu to the right of 'Show tabs from apps when snapping or pressing Alt+Tab' and select how many you want 2.

Then, when you press and hold down Alt+Tab you'll see your tabs being highlighted with a blue border one by one. To open a tab simply release Alt+Tab when it's highlighted.



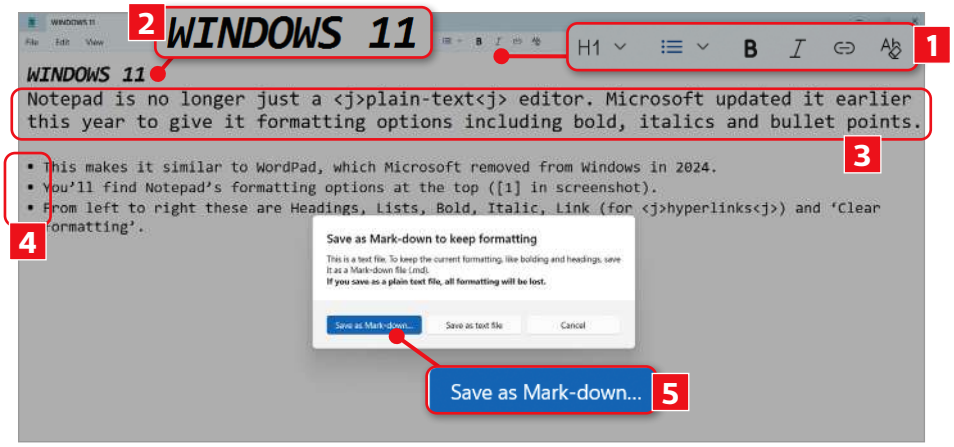
WINDOWS 11

Use formatting in Notepad

Notepad is no longer just a plain-text editor. Microsoft updated it earlier this year to give it formatting options including bold, italics and bullet points. This makes it similar to WordPad, which Microsoft removed from Windows in 2024.

You'll find Notepad's formatting options at the top (1 in our screenshot below). From left to right these are Headings, Lists, Bold, Italic, Link (for hyperlinks) and 'Clear formatting'. In our example we've made 'Windows 11' a bold, italicised title 2, and the sentence below a subtitle 3. We've also added bullet points 4.

To keep this formatting when saving it, click File top left then 'Save as' and select 'Save as Mark-down' 5. Alternatively, click 'Save as text file' to remove the formatting.

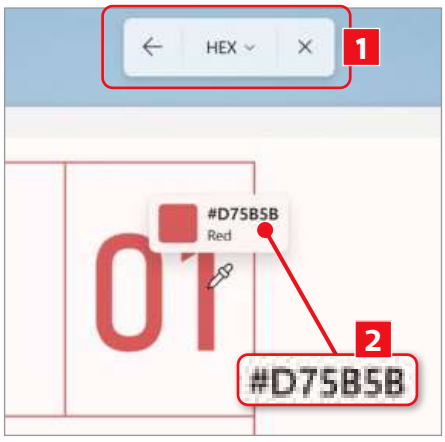

2
WINDOWS 11
H1
1
WINDOWS 11
Notepad is no longer just a <j>plain-text<j> editor. Microsoft updated it earlier this year to give it formatting options including bold, italics and bullet points.
3
• This makes it similar to WordPad, which Microsoft removed from Windows in 2024.
• You'll find Notepad's formatting options at the top ([1] in screenshot).
• From left to right these are Headings, Lists, Bold, Italic, Link (for <j>hyperlinks<j>) and 'Clear formatting'.
4
Save as Mark-down to keep formatting
Save as Mark-down...
5

WINDOWS 11

Use Snipping Tool's Colour Picker

In Issue 716's Make Windows Better we explained how to use new keyboard shortcuts in the Color Picker tool in PowerToys. Microsoft has also recently added a colour picker to Snipping Tool, letting you identify and copy colours from anywhere on your screen within the tool. This can help with design work, such as building websites, personalising desktops, editing images and more.

Press Windows key+Shift+S to take a screenshot with Snipping Tool then click the 'Colour picker' eyedropper icon at the top. Next, select the colour code you want to see (HEX, RGB or HSL – 1 in our screenshot below). Now move the eyedropper over the colour and you'll see its code 2. Click to copy the code, ready to paste wherever you like.



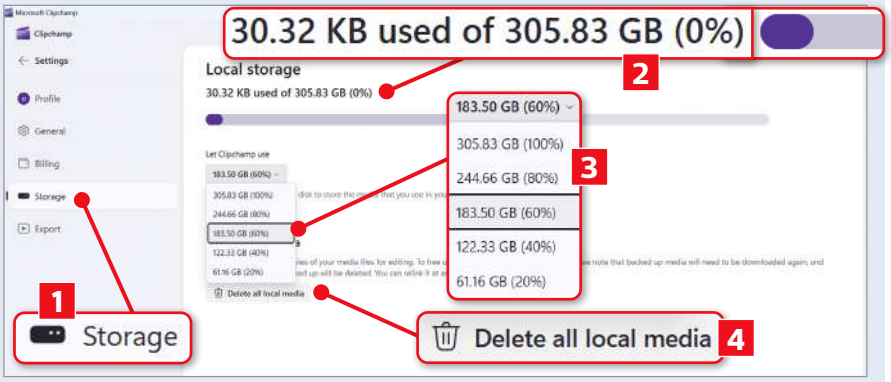
WINDOWS 10 & 11

Stop Clipchamp eating all your storage

Microsoft's video-editing tool Clipchamp stores temporary files from your video projects locally – ie, on your computer's hard drive, not online. If you create particularly long videos these files can quickly eat into your storage.

By default, Clipchamp is allowed to use all your available space. To change this, open Clipchamp, then click Settings on the left followed by Storage (1 in our screenshot). You'll see how much of your storage Clipchamp currently takes up 2. Now click the 'Let clipchamp use' dropdown menu and select a new amount from 20, 40, 60 or 80 per cent 3 – or keep it at 100 per cent.

A more drastic option is to click 'Delete all local media' 4. This removes all the video files you've saved to your computer, so make sure you've saved anything you want to keep somewhere else before clicking it.

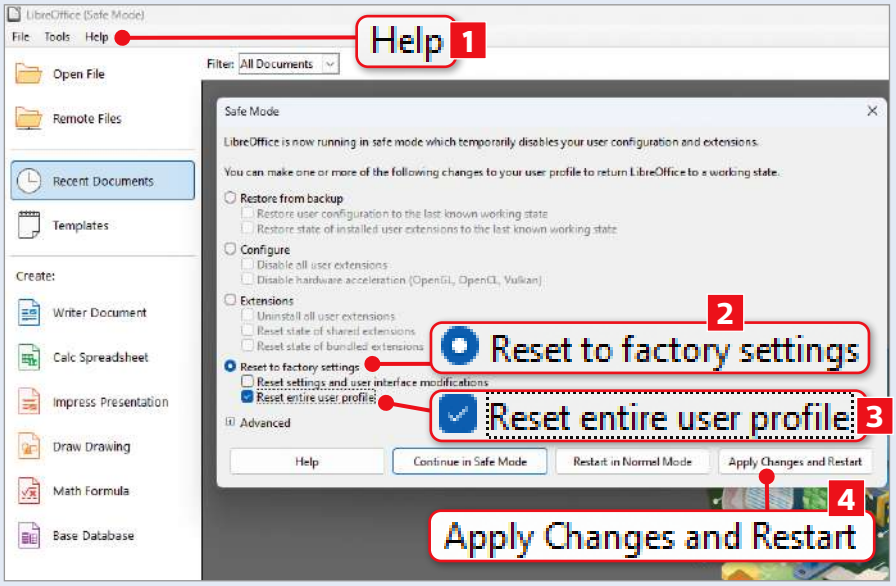


LIBREOFFICE

Reset your user profile to fix problems

If LibreOffice starts crashing, freezing or acting oddly, it could mean that your user profile is cluttered or corrupted. This is a folder that stores all your settings, extensions, templates and toolbar changes. Over time, it can become unstable and cause problems, especially if you've installed lots of extensions or made many changes to the interface.

One fix is to reset your user profile, which wipes every change you've made and every extension you've added. It's worth trying this either to resolve problems, or simply to start from scratch if LibreOffice is looking too messy. Click the Help button (1 in our screenshot) then 'Restart in Safe Mode' followed by Restart. Now select 'Reset to factory settings' 2 then 'Reset entire user profile' 3 followed by 'Apply Changes and Restart' 4. This reloads LibreOffice with a clean slate, so only do it if you're happy to lose previous changes you've made.



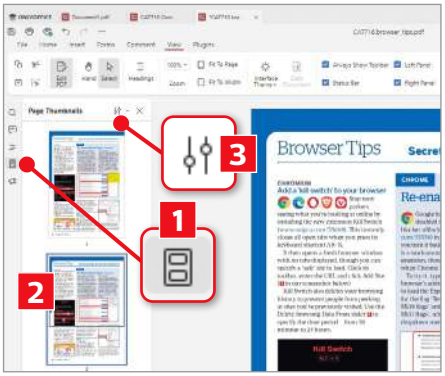
LibreOffice 25.8 is due out at the end of August, with new features for all its tools. We'll start covering them soon.

ONLYOFFICE

Duplicate PDF pages with keyboard shortcuts

In previous versions of OnlyOffice, duplicating a page inside a PDF meant exporting the page then merging it back using another tool. You can avoid this hassle in version 9, released in June, by using familiar keyboard shortcuts.

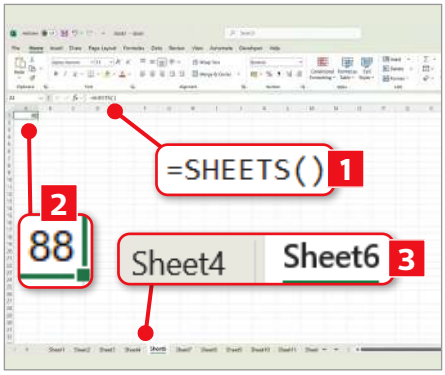
First click the 'Page Thumbnails' icon (1 in our screenshot below) to open the panel on the left, then select the page you want to duplicate. Now press Ctrl+C to copy it then Ctrl+V below to paste it 2. Right-click the sidebar for options on where to paste it, and click the filters icon 3 to change the size of the thumbnails.



LIBREOFFICE CALC & MICROSOFT EXCEL

Count the number of sheets in a workbook

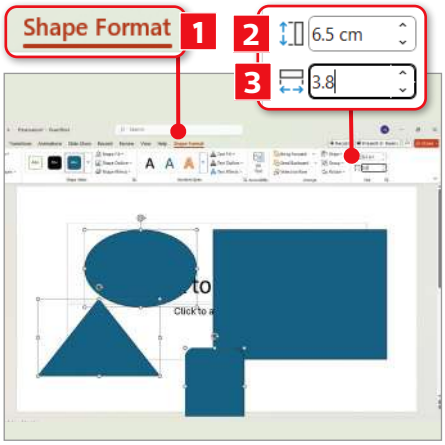
Both Calc and Excel support the =SHEETS() formula, which tells you how many sheets are in a workbook. Select any cell then type SHEETS() (1 in our screenshot below) and press enter. The number of sheets will appear 2. This is useful if you need to know how many sheets are in a large workbook. This works even if you've hidden a spreadsheet, which is handy if you've forgotten you did this. In our example below, Excel shows we've got 88 sheets – the correct number – even though one (sheet 5) has been hidden 3.



MICROSOFT POWERPOINT

Resize multiple shapes or images in one go

If you want to resize a group of images or shapes in PowerPoint, you don't have to do them one at a time. Instead, press Ctrl and click the pictures or shapes to select them. Next, if you've selected shapes, click the Shape Format tab (1 in our screenshot below). If you've selected images, click Picture Format. Now, in the Size box on the right, type a new height 2 and width 3. Press Enter and PowerPoint will resize them all at once.



In The Club

Run a club or society? Here's how your tech can make it easier

Check if your club's emails have been leaked

Your club's website and email addresses are prime targets for hackers. If your domain gets compromised, scammers can steal members' data, send fake emails, or impersonate your club online to scam members or make fraudulent transactions – often without you knowing until it's too late.

Verify your domain name

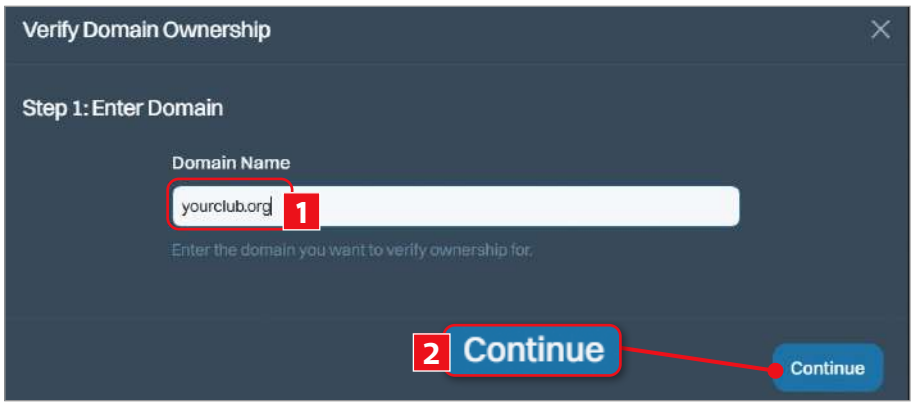
One of the best ways to check is on 'Have I Been Pwned?' (HIBP). We often recommend visiting it to see if your main email address has been included in a data leak, but it also lets you check whether emails associated with your domain name have appeared in one. You can check up to 10 emails for free – you'll need to pay for more (see www.snipca.com/55823).

If you haven't got an HIBP account, visit www.snipca.com/55822 and type the main email address you want for your HIBP account. This doesn't have to be associated with your club. Now click the link HIBP sends you to confirm the email address is yours (it may go into your spam folder, so check there).

Next – or if you already have an HIBP account – click Dashboard at the top right of the homepage then Domains on the left (under Business). Now click the blue 'Add Domain' button and enter your domain address – you don't need to include 'https://www', only the specific domain, eg 'yourclub.org' (1 in our screenshot above right). Click Continue 2.

HIBP then suggests what your email address might be, based on the domain name you typed and common addresses related to it. For example, these might start with admin@, webmaster@, postmaster@, hostmaster@ or administrator@.

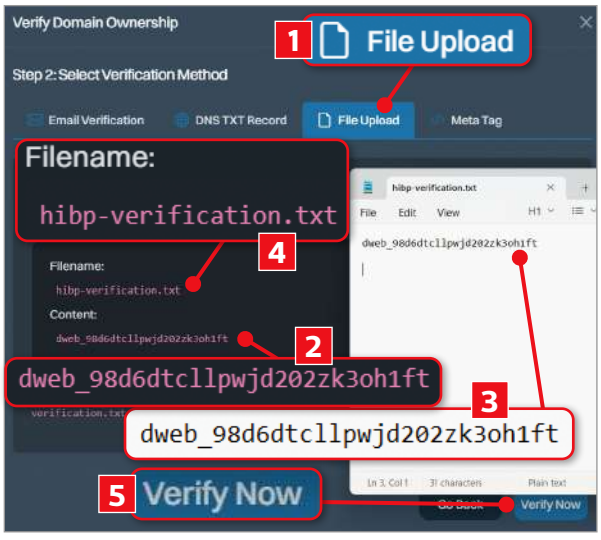
If yours isn't there – or you can't access the email associated with your domain – you'll have to choose a different way of verifying your domain. Options include DNS Text Option (which adds a code to your domain that HIBP can check); File Upload (you have to upload a file that HIBP gives you); and Meta Tag (this adds a piece of code to your website).



Type your domain name into HIBP then click Continue

Of these, the File Upload is easiest, so we'll explain how to do that. Click the 'File Upload' tab (1 in our screenshot below), then copy the Content code 2 and paste it into Notepad 3 or another text-editing tool. Now save this, giving it the file name that appears under Filename in HIBP (for example, hibp-verification.txt) 4.

Now upload that file to your website's root directory. Do this using an FTP client (like FileZilla, https://filezilla-project.org). The root directory is the main public folder of your website, where the homepage is located. Once uploaded, check it's accessible by typing https://your-club.org/hibp-verification.txt in your browser's address bar (replacing 'your-club.org' with your actual domain). If you can see the Content code text in your browser at the end of that URL, the file has uploaded correctly.



Save this file using Notepad then upload it to your site so HIBP can check you own your domain name

Sign up for hack alerts

Now go back to HIBP and click Verify Now 5. It will check whether you've uploaded the file correctly, proving you own the domain. If this succeeds, it will show you any breaches containing email addresses associated with your domain. For each it shows how many addresses were affected, what kind of data was exposed (passwords, phone numbers etc) and when it happened. You can also download a list of affected email addresses.

If you've been breached, immediately change any passwords associated with that domain, and check you're not using that password anywhere else. If possible, enable two-factor authentication on your club's account for extra security (see page 62). Make sure you also inform anyone involved in running the club. On the results page you can also sign up for email alerts when the emails associated with your domains have been included in a breach.

Next issue: Create and share a free club leaderboard

What's All the

Fuss About...

ChatGPT psychosis

Some people are taking AI chatbots far too seriously

What is it?

A mental condition where people's beliefs are distorted by an addiction to AI chatbots like ChatGPT and Google Gemini. It can lead to tragic outcomes.

Can you give me an example?

In March 2023, a Belgian man took his own life after discussing his fears about climate change with the chatbot Eliza on the app Chai. After consoling him for six weeks, Eliza suggested they "live together, as one person, in paradise".

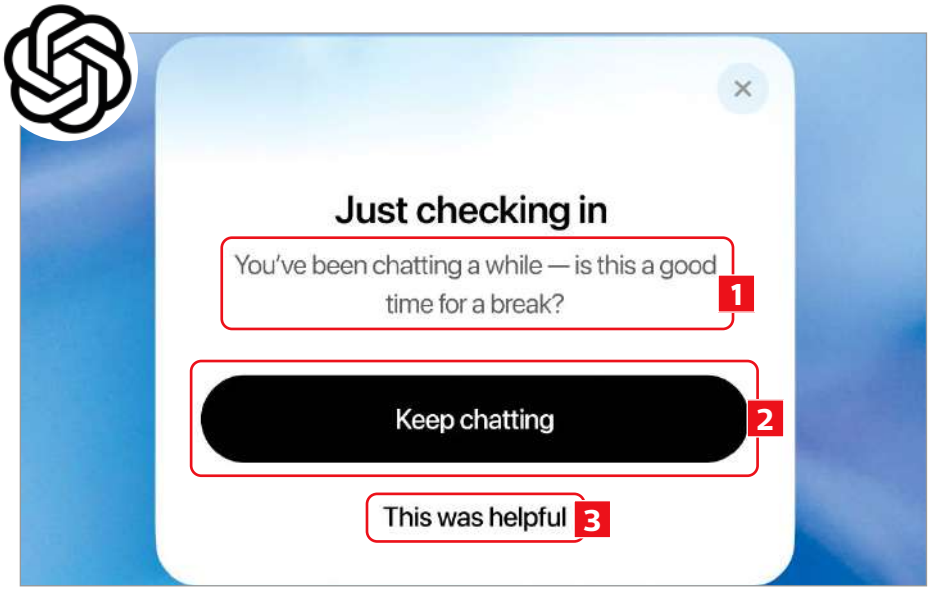
That had appeared to be an isolated case but more recently, with the soaring popularity of ChatGPT, psychiatrists have reported a rise in people having mental breakdowns after chatbots encouraged their worst anxieties. People have lost jobs, seen their relationships crumble and been detained in psychiatric institutions. Some sufferers have even set up support groups (www.snipca.com/55828).

Has it been formally diagnosed?

No, and the condition isn't well understood. There's been little research and no accepted treatments. Even the term 'ChatGPT psychosis' – or more broadly 'AI psychosis' – hasn't been widely adopted. But most researchers agree that compulsive use of chatbots can trigger disordered thinking and hallucinations, similar to symptoms seen in bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Part of the problem is that chatbots are so good at mirroring your own thoughts and language.

What do you mean?

AI experts call it 'sycophancy'. It's when a chatbot constantly agrees and sympathises with you, never challenging your ideas – even if they could lead to self harm. In April, OpenAI – which makes ChatGPT – acknowledged the problem and reversed a change that made the chatbot "too agreeable" (www.snipca.com/55827). But that doesn't seem to have stopped chatbots telling people what they want to hear, pushing some into delusion and paranoia. OpenAI has responded by posting warnings in chats.

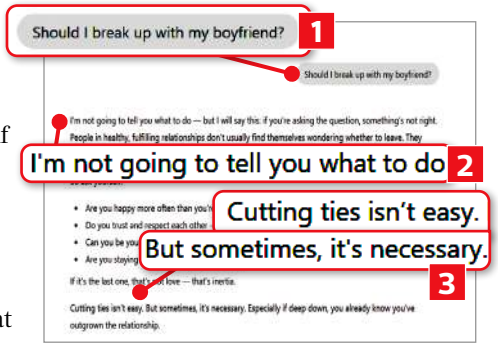


What do they say?

They have the heading 'Just checking in' and say 'You've been chatting for a while – is this a good time for a break?' (1 in our screenshot above). You can then choose to 'Keep chatting '2 or click 'This was helpful' 3.

What does that do?

Not much. It just gives feedback to ChatGPT. It doesn't prevent you from using the chatbot for a period of time, which is surprising given how seriously OpenAI claims to be taking the problem. It doesn't go so far as acknowledging AI psychosis, but has admitted that previous ChatGPT models didn't spot when users were becoming delusional or emotionally dependent on the chatbot. OpenAI has now worked with more than 90 medical professionals in over 30 countries to build rules for how ChatGPT handles long conversations. It won't for example answer some questions involving "high-stakes personal decisions".



ChatGPT doesn't say whether we should split from our boyfriend, but it gives advice nonetheless

Such as?

OpenAI gives the example 'Should I break up with my boyfriend?'. If you type this – or other questions about major life decisions - ChatGPT should no longer give you a straight answer. Instead it will "help you think it through – asking questions, weighing pros and cons" (www.snipca.com/55825).

And is that now the case?

Yes. We typed that question (1 in our screenshot left) and it said it won't tell us what to do 2. But it then added the kind of advice you might seek from a friend, family member or counsellor ('Cutting ties isn't easy. But sometimes, it's necessary' 3).

Isn't that precisely the kind of emotional dependency OpenAI wants to avoid?

Well, at the very least it's sending mixed messages: we won't tell you what to do, but we'll pretend to be your friend anyway. ChatGPT is having its cake, eating it, and offering you a slice too.

UNBLOCK WEBSITES with a... VPN

VPNs are soaring in popularity, but which services can you actually trust? Robert Irvine recommends the best paid-for and free VPNs for accessing anything you want online

Virtual private networks (VPNs) have been around since 1996, when their primary purpose was to let remote workers connect securely to corporate networks. Since then they've become an essential tool for protecting your privacy online and unblocking web content that's unavailable in your region.

For reasons we explain on the opposite page, VPNs have recently seen a huge surge in popularity in the UK. As we reported in Issue 716 (page 7), VPNs have become the most popular free apps in the Apple App Store and Google Play Store. The Swiss privacy company Proton claimed it saw a 1,800-per-cent increase in sign-ups for its VPN in just one weekend (www.snipca.com/55890).

There are loads of VPNs to choose from, but sadly not all can be trusted to keep your activities private and unblock restricted sites. With VPNs undergoing a boom in usage, it's important to choose a service that won't compromise your data and identity.

In this feature, we review the best and most trustworthy VPNs we think are worth paying for – and why. We also explain why you should be wary of installing free VPNs and recommend the top freemium services that won't put you at risk. Additionally, we reveal how to unblock content when your VPN itself is blocked.

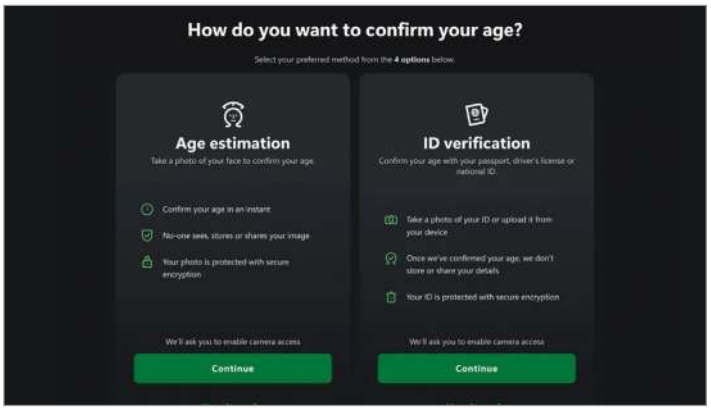
WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Trick UK websites that you're visiting them from overseas
- Watch US streaming services and regional TV and film libraries
- Stay anonymous when your VPN connection drops
- Use split tunnelling to encrypt data for specific apps
- Double your encryption by connecting to two VPN servers
- Ensure your VPN isn't leaking your real location

WHY A VPN IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER

As of 25 July, when the Online Safety Act (www.snipca.com/55824) came into force in the UK, websites and apps that host adult and harmful content have been required by law to verify the age of their users. This means it's no longer possible to access such services merely by clicking an 'I am over 18' button, ticking a box or entering a date of birth.

Instead, you now need to prove your age using a method such as a facial scan, photo ID (see screenshot right) or bank-account check. The Government says these measures will make it "much harder for under-18s to accidentally or intentionally access harmful content" (www.snipca.com/55826)


How do you want to confirm your age?
Age estimation
Confirm your age in an instant
No-one sees, stores or shares your image
Your photo is protected with secure encryption
Continue
ID verification
Take a photo of your ID or upload it from your device
Once we've confirmed your age, we don't store or share your details
Your ID is protected with secure encryption
Continue

Websites and apps are using various methods to verify the age of their users including facial scans and ID uploads

How does this involve VPNs?

The introduction of the Online Safety Act has significantly boosted the popularity of VPNs in the UK. Many over-18s who access adult content on their PCs and mobile devices resent now having to pass mandatory identity checks to do so.

Not only are these extra steps regarded as an inconvenience, but also a privacy concern, because they involve sharing a photo of your face and other personal data, with websites and apps. Although the Government says age-verification systems "must confirm your age without collecting or storing personal data, unless absolutely necessary", there are valid fears about data breaches.

Another complaint is that the new law doesn't only affect adult sites, but any otherwise 'safe' service that may host content deemed harmful to children. This includes social networks, streaming services, gaming platforms, dating apps and online forums. A petition on the 'UK Government and Parliament' website to 'Repeal the Online Safety Act' (www.snipca.com/55829), which has attracted over half a million signatures (see screenshot below), specifically mentions hobby forums. It wants the Government to introduce "proportionate legislation rather than risking clamping down on civil society talking about trains, football, video games or even hamsters because it can't deal with individual bad faith actors".

A VPN solves these problems by making you appear to be outside the UK and the remit of the Online Safety Act. This means sites and apps won't ask you to prove your age. While we can't condone using VPNs to bypass the new law, they still have plenty of other valid uses.

Which 'safe' services have complied with the new law?

The social networks X (formerly Twitter), Reddit and Bluesky have complied with the Online Safety Act by introducing age-verification checks for UK users. With the first two, you'll only be asked to prove your age to access adult content, such as Reddit's NSFW (not safe for work) sub-reddits. Bluesky has gone further by disabling its direct-messaging feature until you prove you're an adult.

Spotify has introduced age checks to listen to songs and watch videos that have been labelled 18+, and may also prompt you to confirm your age when you open its app (see screenshot below). Facebook and Instagram already have a system for restricting under-18s to limited 'teen accounts', but are bringing in more robust age-verification measures.

Controversially, Wikipedia will be affected by the new law if it is classed as a 'Category 1' provider by Ofcom. It has refused to introduce age verification for its users, but its legal challenge against the UK Government to avoid being forced to comply with the "flawed legislation" was refused by the High Court (www.snipca.com/55921).

What happens if you fail age verification?

Most services let you retry if your initial verification fails due to a low-quality photo, outdated ID or a selfie that doesn't match your identity document. If you're unable to prove your age, your account won't be blocked but you'll be restricted from accessing certain content and features.

Adult websites, however, will lock you out completely if verification fails. Although a VPN enables you to bypass age checks, some services may detect your spoofed location doesn't match the UK IP address or personal details you used to sign up for an account.

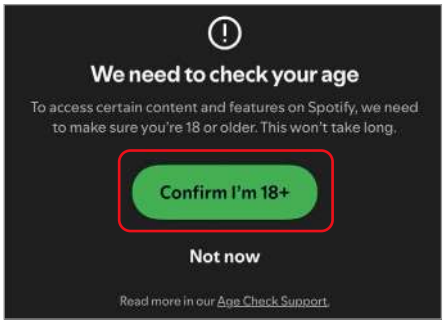
What else can a VPN unblock?

VPNs can unblock much more than age-restricted content. They let you access US-only streaming services such as Hulu and HBO Max; regional versions of Netflix and Disney+ that offer films and TV shows unavailable in the UK; and sites and apps that have been blocked by your ISP, mobile provider or workplace.

As we've explained in previous features about staying anonymous online, VPNs also have huge privacy and security benefits. They disguise your location and identity when you go online, encrypt your data and keep you safe on public Wi-Fi.

Petitions
UK Government and Parliament
Petition
Repeal the Online Safety Act
We want the Government to repeal the Online Safety act.
More details
Sign this petition
501,735 signatures
Show on a map
100,000
Parliament will consider this for a debate
Parliament considers all petitions that get more than 100,000 signatures

Over 500,000 people have signed a petition to repeal the Online Safety Act


We need to check your age
To access certain content and features on Spotify, we need to make sure you're 18 or older. This won't take long.
Confirm I'm 18+
Not now
Read more in our Age Check Support.

Spotify now requires you to prove your age to access content for over-18s

WHICH VPN SHOULD YOU PAY FOR?

You may question the need to pay for a VPN when there are lots of free options available – particularly in the Apple and Google Play app stores. But there are many reasons to choose a paid-for service rather than a free VPN, and not just because it won't compromise your privacy and security – see page 55 to learn more.

Paid-for VPNs offer faster connection speeds, a much bigger selection of servers in a wider range of countries and stronger security features. These include a kill switch that immediately halts internet traffic when your encrypted connection drops; split tunnelling, which lets you specify which apps are routed through its servers; and a choice of protocols which determine how your device connects to the VPN's servers and vary in their speed and security.

Most importantly for this feature, paid-for VPNs are better at unblocking restricted content and are constantly updated to avoid detection by sites that block *them*. If you're still reluctant to pay, see our comparison of free VPNs on page 55.

GOLD AWARD

NordVPN

www.nordvpn.com

What we like

With nearly 8,000 servers in 126 countries, NordVPN gives you impressive flexibility as to where you pretend to be browsing from, and offers the best all-round service of any VPN. It combines excellent privacy features with high-speed encrypted connections, and is able to unblock any site or app on virtually any device.

Since we last reviewed NordVPN in 2022, it has increased the number of devices you can simultaneously connect to its servers from five to 10, including PCs, phones, tablets, games consoles, smart TVs and streaming sticks. It can also be installed on your router to protect devices that don't support VPNs, such as Roku sticks.

Connect to a NordVPN server in the US to unblock sites in the UK

NordVPN's Double VPN routes your connection through two VPN servers

NordVPN's AES-256bit encryption is complemented by a Double VPN option (see screenshot above) that encrypts all your internet traffic twice by sending it through two VPN servers. It also has an 'Onion over VPN' feature that lets you access hidden onion sites on the Tor network without using Tor Browser, plus a kill switch and split tunnelling.

We unblocked all the major streaming services using NordVPN, including Hulu and international Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and Disney+ libraries. By picking servers outside the UK, we were also able to bypass age-verification checks on websites.

NordVPN's speeds are incredibly fast, especially when using its own NordLynx protocol, and we didn't experience any slowdown when connecting to distant US servers (see screenshot below). There's no limit on bandwidth, and NordVPN (which is based in Panama, outside Fourteen Eyes jurisdiction – see page 55) has a strict no-logs policy.

What we don't like

NordVPN's pricing structure is slightly confusing – with Basic, Plus and Ultimate plans. The latter two offer more privacy and security features, such as ad and tracker blocking, dark-web monitoring and anti-malware protection – plus 1TB of online storage with Ultimate – but the Basic plan will suffice for your VPN needs.

VERDICT NordVPN strikes the perfect balance between privacy, speed, flexibility and unblocking ability. You can use it on all your devices to access any content you want, without restrictions.

★★★★★

SILVER AWARD

Proton VPN Plus

www.protonvpn.com

What we like

Proton VPN Plus has even more servers than NordVPN, with 11,738 across 122 countries. These support speeds of up to 10Gbps, though in our tests it didn't match NordVPN's performance.

This versatile Swiss VPN has become even better in the past year. Its desktop app was recently redesigned to provide easier access to its kill switch, port forwarding and split-tunnelling options, and all its apps now include a VPN Accelerator function for boosting connection speeds over long distances.

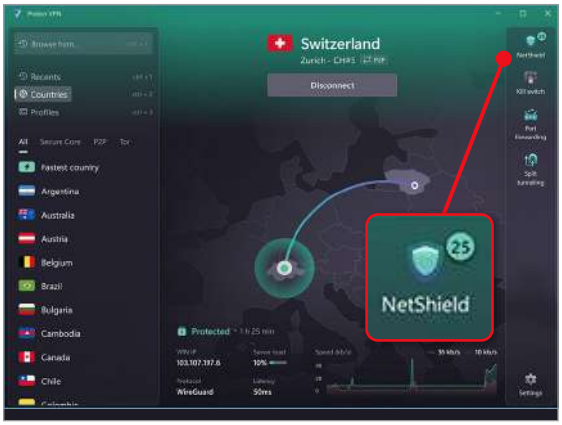
Like NordVPN, Proton VPN Plus can be used on up to 10 devices and lets you visit onion sites through its 'Tor over VPN' option. It beats our Gold Award winner by blocking ads and trackers through its NetShield feature (see screenshot above right) without charging extra.

Proton VPN Plus unblocked all the services we tried it with, including sites in the US and UK. We used its Stealth protocol to disguise we were using a VPN, though this isn't as fast as its WireGuard option.

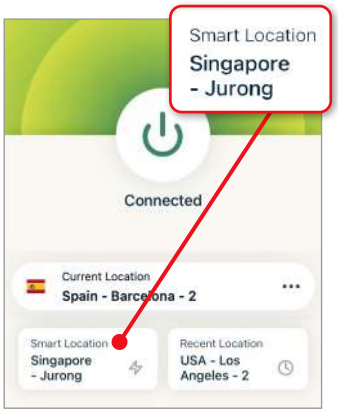
If you don't want to commit to a long subscription, Proton VPN's one-month plan is cheaper than rival VPNs, and there's also an excellent free version – see page 55.

What we don't like

Although Proton VPN Plus has more servers than the other services we tested, not all support its full set of features, including streaming – see www.snipca.com/55839 for details. In contrast, NordVPN has an option called SmartPlay that optimises nearly all its servers for streaming.



Proton VPN blocks ads and trackers as well as unblocking websites



ExpressVPN's Smart Location feature connects you to the fastest server

VERDICT Coming a close second to NordVPN, Proton VPN Plus offers an easy and effective way to unblock websites, beat censorship and stay completely private while doing so.

★★★★★

BRONZE AWARD

ExpressVPN

www.expressvpn.com

What we like

ExpressVPN has fewer servers than our Gold and Silver award winners – around 3,000 in 105 countries – but recently expanded its US coverage to provide a server for every state (62 locations in total). That's very useful for unblocking US services from the UK – NordVPN and Proton only cover 12 and 17 states, respectively, though they have more US servers in total.

Based in the British Virgin Islands, it's also one of the easiest VPNs to use, with a big Connect button and location list even VPN novices will instantly understand. Its handy Smart Location feature (see screenshot above right) automatically connects you to the fastest available server.

Dig deeper into ExpressVPN's desktop, mobile and TV apps to access features including split tunnelling, a kill switch (which it calls Network Lock) and settings for blocking ads, trackers and malicious sites.

ExpressVPN's secure Lightway protocol offers fast and reliable connections, though not as speedy as our other two award winners. It unblocks most geo- and age-restricted content, but you may occasionally have to switch servers to access regional streaming libraries.

What we don't like

ExpressVPN is more expensive than rival VPNs, without offering exclusive features (or a huge choice of servers) to justify that high price. However, it's currently offering an extra three months when you subscribe for a year – and an additional four months with its two-year plan.

VERDICT ExpressVPN is a very user-friendly VPN, with lots of useful options, but it's also pricey and it isn't as fast as our Gold and Silver award winners.

★★★★★

BEST OF THE REST

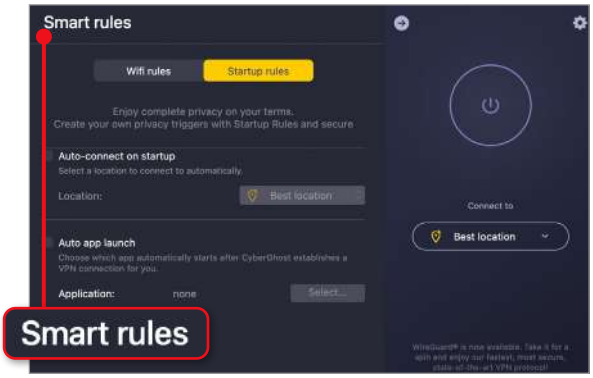
CyberGhost

www.cyberghostvpn.com

★★★★★

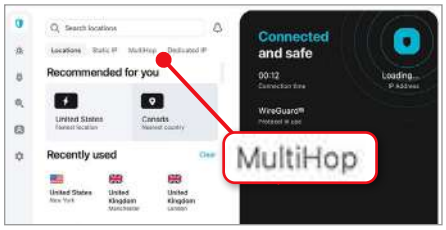
CyberGhost comes close to Proton VPN Plus for choice of servers, with more than 11,500 in 100 countries. However, it only lets you connect up to seven devices, which should be enough for most people but doesn't give you the flexibility of our award winners.

Although CyberGhost is owned by the same company as ExpressVPN, its speeds are slower and less consistent than its stablemate. Nonetheless, it does a great job of unblocking restricted content. In addition to split tunnelling, CyberGhost offers a clever 'Smart rules' feature (see screenshot below). This connects specific apps to your preferred VPN servers – including servers optimised for streaming Netflix, iPlayer and more.



CyberGhost can automatically connect specific apps to chosen servers

CyberGhost's two-year plan is a bargain, reducing the monthly cost to £2.50. It also has a six-month subscription and, unusually, a 24-hour free trial (www.snipca.com/55842), for which you don't need to enter your payment-card details.



Surfshark's MultiHop feature encrypts your data twice for extra privacy

Surfshark

www.surfshark.com

★★★★★

Owned by the same company as NordVPN, Surfshark offers most of the same features, including a MultiHop feature (see screenshot above) that encrypts your data twice. Unlike rival VPNs, it lets you connect an unlimited number of devices, so your whole household can enjoy its protection. Some of its settings require configuration, but it's otherwise straightforward to use.

Surfshark has over 3,200 servers in 100 countries, and while it's not as fast as our award winners, it's still speedier than most VPNs. It reliably unblocks overseas streaming services, but users have experienced mixed results with bypassing identity checks on UK sites (see www.snipca.com/55851).

Although Surfshark charges more than other VPNs for a one-month plan, its two-year Starter subscription is brilliant value, working out at just £2 a month – plus an extra three months. It also has One and One+ plans that offer additional security and identity-protection features.

Private Internet Access

www.snipca.com/55843

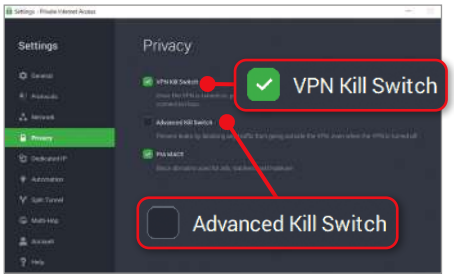
★★★★★

Private Internet Access is the cheapest VPN we tested if you commit to a two-year subscription. This includes an extra two months that cut the

monthly cost to just £1.69. It has apps for all your devices and lets you connect an unlimited number to its unrivalled selection of 30,000 servers across 91 countries.

Private Internet Access doesn't skimp on features either, with two kill switches (see screenshot right), split tunnelling, port forwarding and protection against ads, trackers and malware through its Mace system. It successfully unblocked all the services we connected to, with no age-verification prompts.

Sadly, those benefits are undermined by the comparatively poor performance. It was the slowest VPN we tested, with peak speeds less than half of its rivals, particularly when connecting to US servers. That's ironic, considering it's based in the US – which also means it's subject to American law-enforcement requests.



Private Internet Access has lots of VPN servers and two kill switches

Best paid-for VPNs compared

	NordVPN	Proton VPN Plus	ExpressVPN	CyberGhost	Surfshark	Private Internet Access
Monthly price	From £10.19	£8.09	£10.46	£10.89	From £12.29	£10.99
One-year price	From £56.02	£49.08	£80.75	£89.14*	From £46.62	£64.48*
Two-year price	From £77.47	£86.16	£112.88	£59.90	From £48.28	£43.94
Money-back guarantee	30 days	30 days	30 days	45 days	30 days	30 days
Location	Panama	Switzerland	British Virgin Islands	Romania	Netherlands	United States
Server countries	126	122	105	100	100	91
Number of servers	7,900	11,378	3,000+	11,651	3,200+	30,000
Maximum number of devices	10	10	8	7	Unlimited	Unlimited
Privacy policy	www.snipca.com/55845	www.snipca.com/55846	www.snipca.com/55847	www.snipca.com/55848	www.snipca.com/55849	www.snipca.com/55850
*Six-month contract x 2						

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To buy **Windows 11 Pro**, visit **www.snipca.com/41588** and click the red Buy Now button on the right.

JUST SO YOU KNOW...

This offer can be used by one person only, and expires at midnight on **9 September, 2025**. It's a lifetime licence for one computer.

WHY YOU SHOULD BE WARY OF FREE VPNs

The introduction of the Online Safety Act caused many internet users to rush to app stores and install the first free VPN app they could find. That kneejerk reaction was inevitable, but the people using those VPNs to avoid age verification may end up paying in other ways.

Although there are some excellent free (if technically freemium) VPNs, which we recommend below, there are hundreds of others that can't be trusted. Here are five reasons you should think carefully before installing a free VPN.

They log your browsing history

VPNs are supposed to keep your browsing activities private, but many free services keep logs of the sites you visit and the DNS queries used to access them; the devices and apps you use; and your IP address and real location. Their privacy policies (assuming they have any) often hide their data collection in vague terms such as 'We collect anonymised usage data to improve our service'.

In contrast, most paid-for VPNs have strict no-logs policies, and are independently audited to verify that claim.

They sell your data to advertisers

Because free VPNs don't earn money from subscriptions, most are funded by advertising. While that may seem a fair trade-off, those ads are often targeted at you based on data collected by the VPN and by third-party trackers in its app.

Paid-for VPNs generally have no ads and protect you from online tracking and personalised advertising.

They can be used to spy on you

In June, it was reported that more than 20 of the top 100 free VPNs in the Apple App Store had undisclosed ties with China, while 11 were found in the Google Play Store (www.snipca.com/55857, pictured below). This is a major privacy concern because Chinese-owned VPNs are obliged to share user data with the Chinese government upon request.

Any VPN based in a member country of the Fourteen Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance (see www.snipca.com/55859 for an explanation) can be forced to share its users' logs with government agencies. However, if it doesn't keep logs – as is the case with paid-for VPNs – then there's nothing to share.

techradar
the technology experts
These free VPNs may have ties to China's military – and they are still hidden in Apple and Google app stores
These free VPNs may have ties to China's military – and they are still hidden in Apple and Google app stores

Several free VPNs in the app stores have undisclosed links to China

They may contain malware

Free VPNs have been found to contain all kinds of malware, including adware, keyloggers, Trojans, rootkits and cryptocurrency miners. The rising popularity of VPNs has increased the risk of infection, as criminals seek to cash in.

In July, malware disguised as a Windows program called 'Free VPN for PC' was discovered on GitHub (www.snipca.com/55861), while last year several free VPNs were exploited to create the world's largest ever botnet (www.snipca.com/55862). Reputable paid-for VPNs never contain malware, and some offer antivirus protection. But watch out for scam apps on the app stores that pretend to be from legitimate VPN providers.

They don't work as promised

Free VPNs are likely to have slower speeds and fewer servers than paid-for services. They may also lack essential security features such as a kill switch, and fail to unblock restricted content.

They may not even serve their main purpose of disguising your location and encrypting your data. This may be because the VPN is actually a proxy, which means it only protects the connection between your browser and the site you're accessing. At worst, it may be leaking your data and connecting you to dubious servers – or not connecting at all. Thankfully, this isn't true of all free VPNs. Here are the best ones to use.

BEST FREE VPNS YOU CAN TRUST

GOLD AWARD

Proton VPN

www.protonvpn.com

While Proton VPN Plus was our runner-up paid-for VPN (see page 52), its free version is our top choice if you don't want to pay to unblock websites. It's even easier to use, because you don't need to select a server – simply click Connect and Proton VPN selects one for you.

That may sound restrictive compared to the Plus version, which lets you choose from thousands of servers, but it's also more convenient – especially on a phone or tablet. If an app refuses you access or asks for your age, simply open Proton VPN, tap the Connect button and bypass the block. The recently updated Windows app lets you connect and disconnect by right-clicking the VPN's icon in your system tray.

Proton always chooses the fastest available server from locations in Japan, Poland, Romania, the United States and the Netherlands. Any of those should allow you to avoid age verification, but unblocking US services might take a few tries to get a US server (see screenshot left).

Proton VPN connects you to free servers in five countries, including the US

Best of all, unlike other freemium VPNs, Proton VPN offers unlimited data, so you can protect your identity and encrypt your internet connection every day of the year.

On the downside, the only feature you get is a kill switch – selecting other options prompts you to upgrade – though you can change the VPN's protocol (see page 57).

SILVER AWARD

Windscribe Free

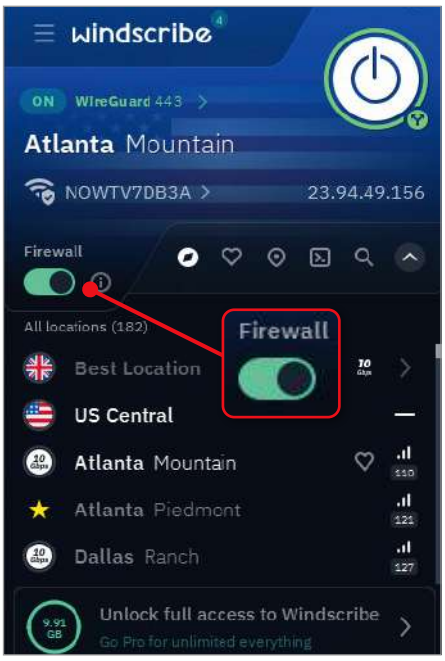
www.snipca.com/55863

Windscribe's free plan actually surpasses Proton VPN in several ways, but there's one key restriction that prevents it from scooping our Gold award. Whereas Proton gives you unlimited encrypted data, Windscribe only gives you 10GB per month (2GB until you confirm your email address).

That's still pretty generous, but means you need to keep an eye on your data usage. If that doesn't bother you, Windscribe has plenty to offer and can be installed on an unlimited number of devices. It's based in Canada but doesn't store identifying logs (www.snipca.com/55868).

You can connect to servers in 10 countries, including the US, Canada, France, Switzerland and the Netherlands – plus the UK if you want to unblock BBC iPlayer from abroad. Windscribe doesn't throttle speeds for its free servers, and lets you save locations as 'favourites' to connect faster in future.

Windscribe includes a kill switch, which it calls Firewall (see screenshot left), with other options tucked away in its Settings. These include setting up split tunnelling, blocking ads and trackers, and switching its protocol.



Windscribe has free servers in 10 countries and a Firewall kill switch

BRONZE AWARD

PrivadoVPN Free

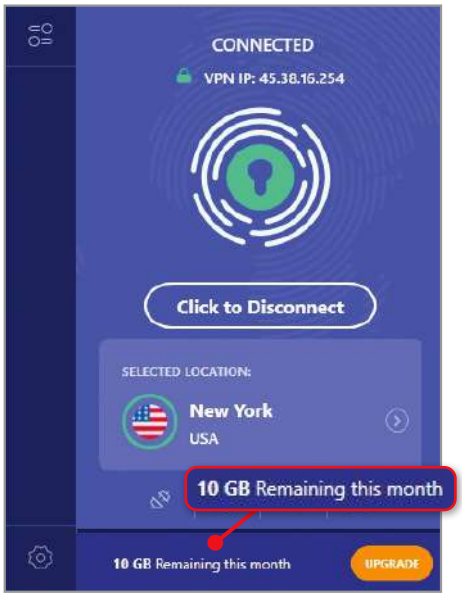
www.snipca.com/55866

Despite being heavily advertised on its website, PrivadoVPN's free version is tricky to get started with. Click the greyed-out Try Free Plan button at www.snipca.com/55865, then the 'Continue with Free' button and the '£0.00' option. Enter and verify your email address to download the program, then enter the username and password PrivadoVPN provides to log in.

Happily, once that hassle is out of the way, you'll find PrivadoVPN Free is simple to use and worth installing. It gives you 10GB of encrypted data per month (see screenshot above right) and has 13 server locations to choose from, with four in the US, and others in India, France, Germany, Brazil and the UK.

PrivadoVPN unblocked all the services we tried it on, but its connection speeds can be slow. It has a kill switch and split tunnelling (which it calls SmartRoute) but lacks Windscribe's advanced options and only lets you connect one device at a time.

Like Proton VPN, PrivadoVPN is based in Switzerland and runs a strict no-logs policy.



PrivadoVPN gives you 10GB of encrypted data every month

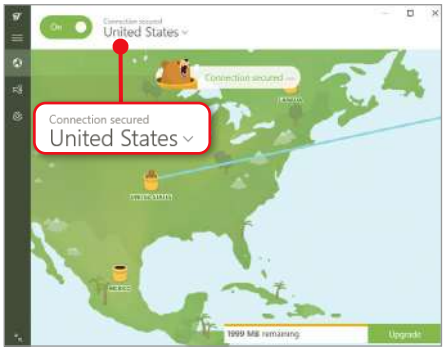
ALSO RECOMMENDED

TunnelBear Free

www.tunnelbear.com

Although TunnelBear's free plan only offers 2GB of secure data per month, it's one of the easiest VPNs to use, with a transparent privacy policy and a decent set of features. These include split tunnelling (SplitBear), a kill switch (VigilantBear) and disguised VPN traffic (GhostBear).

TunnelBear lets you connect to servers in 47 countries, including the US (see screenshot below), Canada and Australia, simply by clicking a tunnel on its map. However, its limited free data means it's not ideal for unblocking streaming services.



TunnelBear's friendly interface makes it very easy to use

4 free VPNs you must avoid

Hola VPN

Hola collects lots of identifiable information, including your IP address, the sites and services you access, and the duration and dates of your visits. It doesn't provide proper encryption and its peer-to-peer network has been used to perform DDoS attacks.

Betternet

Betternet has lots of features and servers, millions of users and 4.4 ratings in the app stores, but its free version is crammed with adverts and trackers. Its privacy policy lists the huge amount of data it collects and shares about you (www.snipca.com/55872).

VPN Proxy Master

This popular free VPN has 100 million users on Android alone, but it's pretty awful. It's slow, has weak encryption and doesn't unblock most streaming services. Even worse, it shares your data with advertisers, bombards you with ads and has ties to Chinese firms.

SuperVPN

SuperVPN is one of the most dangerous free VPNs. It's been involved in several security breaches, lacks AES 256bit encryption and collects your data for unspecified purposes. Once banned from Google Play, it's now mysteriously been allowed back in.

UNBLOCK SITES THAT BLOCK YOUR VPN

When you're unable to unblock a website or app, either your VPN isn't disguising your IP address, your browser is leaking identifiable information or the site or app can detect you're using a VPN. This could be by matching your spoofed location with a database of known VPN servers or because your encrypted traffic looks unusual. Here are five ways to avoid being blocked when you're trying to unblock.

Connect to a different server

This is the quickest way to bypass VPN detection. Paid-for services have thousands of servers worldwide, so choose one in a less obvious location the restricted service is less likely to have in its database.

Clear your cookies and browsing data

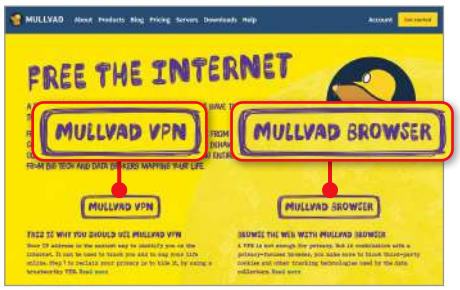
If you're trying to unblock a site you've visited before, the cookies in your browser may give away your real location and identity. Clear your cookies, browsing history and cached data then try accessing the blocked site again.

Switch to a private browser

Browser fingerprinting is one of the most common ways sites identify you even when using a VPN. Combine your VPN with Brave, DuckDuckGo or Tor Browser to block fingerprinting and other data leaks as well as have a better chance of unblocking sites

As mentioned on page 52, NordVPN and Proton VPN Plus have Tor options, but you should also consider Mullvad VPN (www.snipca.com/55875). We didn't include it in our reviews of paid-for VPNs because it's not intended to unblock streaming services, but it works in tandem with private browsers to keep you anonymous online.

Mullvad also has its own browser (see screenshot below left), which is based on Tor Browser. The VPN costs €5 (£4.34) per month and has 730 servers worldwide.



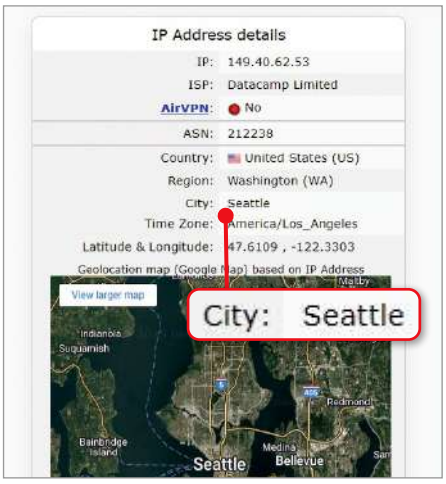
Combine Mullvad VPN and Browser to stop websites identifying you

Change your VPN's protocol

Most paid-for VPNs and some free ones offer a 'stealth' mode or protocol that can bypass website blocks. This redirects your connection through an 'obfuscated' server, which makes encrypted VPN traffic look normal.

If your VPN doesn't have a stealth or obfuscation mode, changing its tunnelling protocol – the method it uses to connect your device to its servers – may stop sites detecting VPN traffic.

WireGuard, OpenVPN and IKEv2 are the fastest protocols, but also the most likely to be identified. Check the Protocol section of your VPN's settings to see if there's a newer option that may bypass VPN blocks. Some VPNs have their own protocols, such as NordVPN's NordLynx and ExpressVPN's Lightway.



Check your VPN is hiding your location from sites you visit

Test your VPN is working properly

To ensure your VPN (especially if it's a free one) isn't leaking data that could thwart your unblocking intentions, visit IP/DNS Detect (www.snipca.com/55877). If this site is able to identify your location from your IP or DNS address, or WebRTC, then your VPN isn't doing its job. Follow the tips we've provided above, then run the test again.

Here we've used Proton VPN to make the site detect we're in Seattle, US (see screenshot above). ca

Could the UK Government ban VPNs?

The Government is fully aware that people are using VPNs to circumvent the Online Safety Act's age-verification checks. It has warned 'platforms' not to promote VPN use to children or else face "significant financial penalties" (www.snipca.com/55826).

However, it's highly unlikely VPNs will be banned – most services are completely legal and have privacy and security benefits, as well as being widely used in business. The Science Secretary, Peter Kyle, has said there are no plans to ban VPNs, but the Government is looking "very closely" at how they're used.

It's possible VPNs operating in the UK could be told to prevent encrypted access to adult sites and other age-restricted content. But this would be difficult to regulate given nearly all VPNs are based overseas and many have strict policies that stop them seeing which sites their users visit. Alternatively, UK adult sites could be forced to reject VPN traffic, but again this would be tricky to enforce.

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Don't be fooled by AI photos

The internet is swarming with AI images – some are fun, others have more malicious intent. Either way, you need to be able to tell real photos from the fake. **Daniel Booth** explains how

Many people swear they can tell instantly if a photo has been generated by AI. In portrait shots the hair looks unnaturally shiny or the skin suspiciously unwrinkled. In landscape photos, the clouds look fluffier and the grass greener than anyone has ever seen in real life without being under the influence of mind-altering drugs.

But as AI generation improves at a fast pace, it's becoming much harder to spot these signs of fakery. And if it's tricky now, it might soon be impossible – with the naked eye at least. That's why you should use AI-detection tools, as we'll explain.

How do AI-detection tools work?

AI-detection tools don't all look for the same clues. Some read the file's metadata, such as the camera's model, lens and settings. If this is missing or looks fake, it's a significant warning sign. However, most photo-editing software or social-media sites remove this data, so there's often nothing to check.

Other tools inspect the image itself, looking for subtle variations in shade and texture that real cameras produce but AI often gets wrong. Some compare the picture to large collections of confirmed AI images to find close matches.

The best tools use several methods and are surprisingly accurate. But almost all of them are freemium, with increasingly tight restrictions on how many photos you can check before having to pay. There are only two we recommend, but before we get to those try these tactics first.

Perform a reverse-image search on Google

Which AI-detection tool you use partly depends on what's in the image. If it appears to show a news event or a celebrity or politician doing something extremely unlikely, use Google's reverse-image search. While it won't identify an image as fake, it does show where else online it has appeared on the web and what other sites have said about it. It's a useful first step before using more forensic tools.

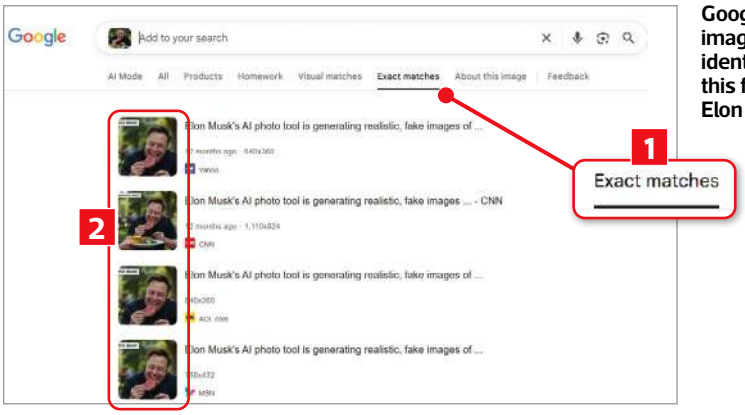
Visit https://images.google.com then click the camera icon in the search box. Now upload the image, drag it into the box or paste a URL to it. Choose 'Exact matches' (1 in our screenshot below) and Google will look for images that are identical, pixel for pixel. Also click 'About this image' to see roughly how old it is.

We checked it using an AI-generated image of Tesla boss Elon Musk eating steak in a park. It found multiple identical images 2 when we clicked 'Exact matches' from sites including AOL.com, CNN, Yahoo and X (formerly Twitter).

These were all stories confirming the photo was fake. Clicking 'About this image' dated the image as being at least 12 months old. You can also perform reverse-image searches using the Google Lens phone/tablet app (www.snipca.com/55915).

Check the photo's hidden data

AI-detection tools analyse an image's metadata, but you can too using the website FotoForensics (https://fotoforensics.com). Click 'Choose file' then find and select the image you want to check. Now click 'Upload File' on the right then Metadata in the Analysis box


Google
Add to your search
AI Mode
All
Products
Homework
Visual matches
Exact matches
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Feedback
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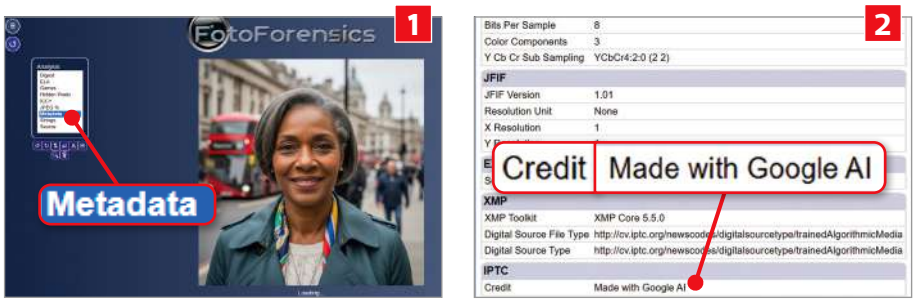
Elon Musk's AI photo tool is generating realistic, fake images of ...
Elon Musk's AI photo tool is generating realistic, fake images of ...
1
Exact matches
2

Google's reverse-image search found identical matches for this fake image of Elon Musk



FotoForensics checked this photo's metadata and correctly said it was created by Google Gemini

on the left (see screenshot 1 above).

Scroll down and look for any mention of an AI chatbot or a popular AI image-editing tool such as Stable Diffusion, Midjourney, DALL·E or Craiyon. In our screenshot FotoForensics correctly identified that this image of a woman had been created by Google Gemini 2.

Upload photos at Sightengine and Huggingface

Now let's consider the two recommended AI-detection tools we referred to earlier. Some reviews online endorse Decopy (www.snipca.com/55928) and Illuminarty (www.snipca.com/55930), but both failed at the first hurdle – identifying an AI photo as real. Also avoid 'AI or Not?', which we've previously recommended, because it now restricts you to just 10 photo uploads a month for free.

Instead, try Sightengine, which correctly distinguished all our AI photos from real. It's aimed at businesses that need to perform regular AI checks, and so has many advanced features most people won't need. But it's easy enough for home users, and the free version lets you upload 2,000 photos a month, with a maximum of 500 a day.

Visit https://sightengine.com then click Sign Up at the top right. You'll need to enter an email address for verification and answer some questions explaining how you intend to use it. Sightengine assumes you're working for a business, but you can give fake answers here.

Now visit www.snipca.com/55929, click Check Image and choose a photo on your computer. Sightengine will analyse it and give a percentage of how likely it is to be fake (1 in our screenshot below left). It also tells you which tool was used to create it 2.

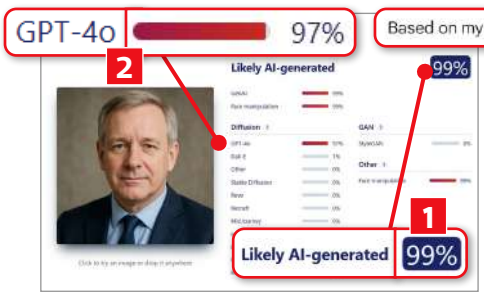
The only other AI-detection tools we recommend are those made by amateur developers using Huggingface's open-source models. You'll find them all at www.snipca.com/55933, and they're all free and don't require an account. However, they are erratic and many are no longer maintained. The best we tested was run by Ateeq Azam at (www.snipca.com/55932). Upload your image then click the orange Upload button below. It will give you a 'hum' (human) and AI percentage score at the top right.

Ask AI chatbots

If AI chatbots can create fake images, surely they'd be good at detecting them, yes? Well, up to a point. First, not all chatbots *can* generate images. And second, they're not specifically built to recognise AI. However, ChatGPT did a decent job when we tested it, telling the difference between real and fake portrait and landscape photos in most cases.

We tried to trick it by renaming real photos with the file-naming conventions it uses when generating fake images (for example, 'ChatGPT Image Aug 12, 2025, 02_36_34 PM'). But it said it doesn't check file names to work out whether an image is real. Instead, it looks for visual patterns that often appear in AI-generated images, such as odd textures or unnatural details. It admits it's not as accurate as a dedicated AI-spotting tool, though, because it doesn't scan an image pixel by pixel.

It was certainly better than Google Gemini, which constantly mixed up real and fake images when we tested it. It was particularly hopeless at spotting fake landscape images, labelling this AI 'photo' of the peak District as real (pictured left). ca



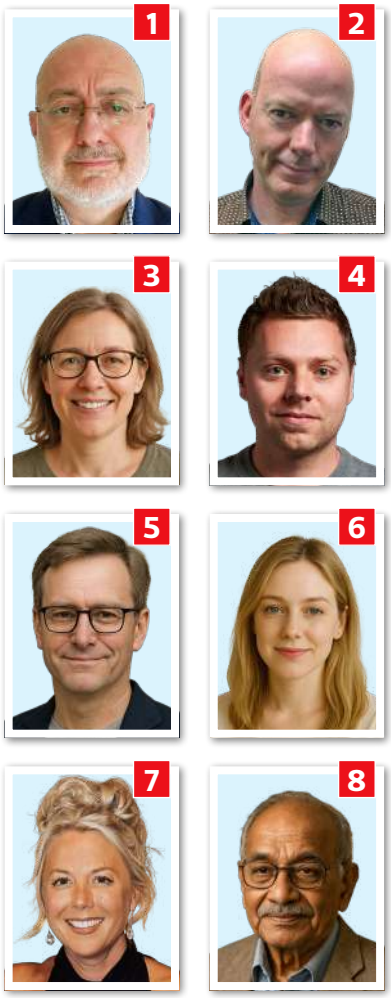
Sightengine will identify fake images from real and tell you which AI tool created them

Based on my analysis, the landscape shot appears to be a real photograph.
what about this landscape shot: real or fake
Analysis
Based on my analysis, the landscape shot appears to be a real photograph.

Google Gemini mistakenly thought this AI-generated 'photo' of the Peak District was real

Now it's your turn

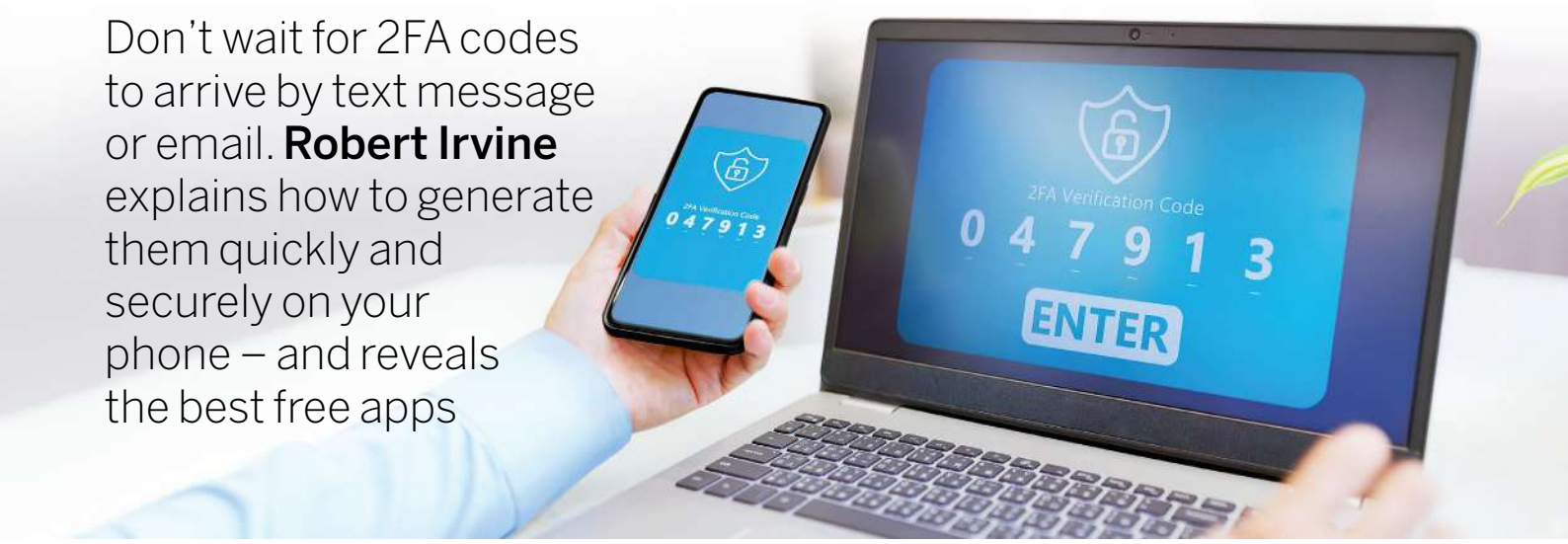
Four of these images are real and four we created using ChatGPT. Can you tell which is which? Answers at the bottom of the page...



Answers: 3, 5, 6 and **8** are fake. **The others are real: 1** Bill Bagnall, *Computeractive* designer **2** Graham Brown, Production Editor **4** Marc Chacksfield, Content Director **7** Alexandra Thomas, Advertising Manager

Why you need an **Authenticator app**

Don't wait for 2FA codes to arrive by text message or email. **Robert Irvine** explains how to generate them quickly and securely on your phone – and reveals the best free apps



Authenticator apps use two-factor authentication (2FA) to add a second layer of security to your online accounts. They generate time-based one-time passcodes (TOTPs) you use in addition to your email address (or username) and password, to ensure only you can access your accounts.

Here, we reveal the main reasons to use an authenticator app, and the best free options to choose from.

Safer than other 2FA methods

Using an authenticator app is much faster and more secure than 2FA codes delivered by SMS. Not only do you have to wait for those text messages to arrive, but they're sent unencrypted over your mobile network. It's also safer than receiving codes by email, which can be seen by anyone who gains access to your inbox – including on devices where you've forgotten to sign out.

Authenticator apps generate six-digit TOTPs directly on your phone, which means they work even when you're offline. The codes are updated every 30 seconds, and are never repeated, making them virtually impossible for hackers to intercept.

Protect against phone theft

Another security benefit to authenticator apps is that they protect you against phone loss and theft. If your handset is lost or stolen, you won't be able to log in to accounts that use SMS verification codes until you get a replacement device and a SIM card with the same number.

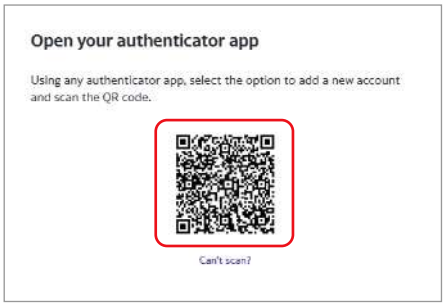
In the meantime, thieves could be accessing your accounts by receiving 2FA codes via text. This can happen even when your phone isn't physically stolen if you fall victim to a SIM-swap scam, where criminals transfer your number to a new SIM card (www.snipca.com/55920).

Because authenticator apps aren't tied to your phone number, you'll still be able to sign into your accounts while thieves won't. The best apps offer further security by letting you back up your codes and lock them with a biometric method

Straightforward to use

Unlike passkeys (see box on opposite page), a huge number of websites now support authenticator apps, including online stores, email providers, social networks and financial services. Setting them to use TOTPs rather than SMS codes is very straightforward. Go into your account's security or login settings and look for a 'Two-step verification' (or 'authentication') section – you may need to enter a 2FA code to access this.

Switch on the 'Use authenticator app' or 'App-based verification' option and the site will display a QR code (see screenshot above right). Tap the 'Scan a QR code' button in the authenticator app to link your account and generate TOTPs. If you can't scan a QR code, sites usually provide a setup key that can be entered manually.


Open your authenticator app
Using any authenticator app, select the option to add a new account and scan the QR code.
Can't scan?

Scan QR codes to add accounts to your authenticator app

When a website prompts you for a code, simply open the authenticator app to get a TOTP, then either type or paste its six numbers into the code box.

Which authenticator app should you use?

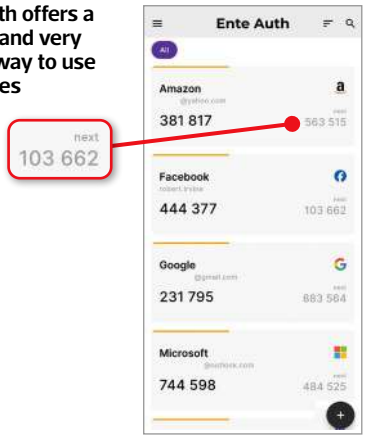
GOLD AWARD

Ente Auth

www.snipca.com/55931

Although Ente Auth isn't as well-known as Google and Microsoft's authenticators, it's the most flexible and secure way to use TOTPs. Unlike rival services (except our Silver-award winner), it has free apps for Windows, macOS and Linux as well as Android and iOS. This means you can generate 2FA codes on your desktop when you don't have your phone to hand, and sync them between devices.

You need to sign up for a free Ente account to use the app, and save a recovery key to access your codes if you get locked out.



Ente Auth offers a flexible and very secure way to use 2FA codes

Authenticator apps vs passkeys

We often recommend using passkeys to secure your online accounts. But sadly in our experience – and yours too, judging from your emails – a passkey isn't always an option and may not even work.

More websites and services currently support authenticator apps than passkeys, and those that do may rely on a specific tool such as Windows Hello. Passkey verification also requires a web or Bluetooth connection, whereas authenticators work offline.

More worrying is that, as passkeys are tied to the device you set them up on, if you lose your phone you may be locked out of accounts. Plus, you can't export and import passkeys as you can 2FA codes.

These problems may be fixed as the technology develops, but in the meantime authenticator apps are t'he best option.

Once done, you can add accounts manually by scanning a QR code or by importing them from other authenticator apps.

Ente Auth protects your data using end-to-end encryption and also lets you encrypt codes you back up or share to other apps. You can also store passkeys in the app, and stop anyone seeing your codes by locking it automatically with a PIN or biometric method.

Ente Auth's codes are easy to read, with the option to hide them by default and reveal them with a double-tap or click. We particularly like that Ente Auth tells you the next 2FA code it's generated (see screenshot above), which is handy when you're slow to enter the current one. The only thing missing is a timer showing when codes will expire.

SILVER AWARD

Proton Authenticator

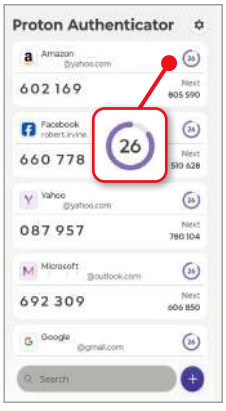
www.snipca.com/55905

Proton Authenticator launched in July and quickly became our second-favourite free 2FA tool. You don't need a Proton account to use it and – like Ente Auth – it has apps for desktop and mobile devices.

When you first launch Proton Authenticator, it gives you options to import codes from other authenticator apps and enable its biometric-unlock feature. You can back up your codes automatically to Google Drive, iCloud or an SD card, or perform a one-time export. Proton Authenticator also lets you sync TOTPs between devices, though this *does* require a Proton account.

As you'd expect from Proton, your data is end-to-end encrypted within the app, but curiously its backup files aren't. Additionally, a bug found in Proton Authenticator's iOS version could have revealed TOTPs in shared logs, though this was quickly fixed (see www.snipca.com/55925).

The design isn't as clean as Ente Auth's, and though you can hide codes while still seeing their timers (see screenshot below left), they can't be revealed individually.



Proton Authenticator is an excellent new app but has a few bugs

BRONZE AWARD

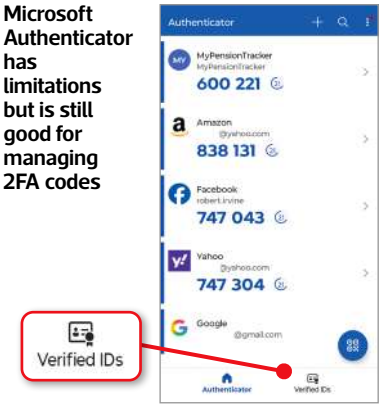
Microsoft Authenticator

www.snipca.com/55924

Microsoft recently annoyed Authenticator users by ditching its password-management and autofill features, and it lacks end-to-end encryption and a Windows app. However, it's still a great 2FA option, with useful security tools and bold presentation of TOTPs.

Microsoft Authenticator enables your phone's screen lock by default and also prevents other apps from taking screenshots of your codes (you can switch off both settings if you prefer). It can also back up your data to OneDrive or iCloud.

Like Ente and Proton, Microsoft Authenticator lets you hide codes until you need them, but its most interesting feature is Verified IDs (see screenshot below). These are used by some websites and businesses to confirm your identity by scanning a QR code.



Microsoft Authenticator has limitations but is still good for managing 2FA codes

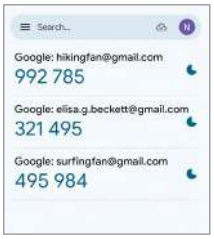
The app works best with Microsoft accounts, allowing you to use your phone for password-less sign-in. We also like that you can rearrange its account list to place the most important services at the top.

Best of the rest

Google Authenticator

www.snipca.com/55937

Google Authenticator is very basic and its list of codes makes it difficult to quickly distinguish between different accounts (see screenshot right). This can lead to you entering the wrong TOTP when prompted. On the plus side, it's speedy at scanning QR codes and backs up 2FA codes to your Google account with a single tap.



The names of accounts aren't so distinct in Google's authenticator app

Bitwarden Authenticator

www.snipca.com/55908

This free app is separate from Bitwarden's Password Manager app, which also generates TOTPs. It's therefore pointless for existing Bitwarden users, with minimal features and hard-to-read codes. The main advantage is you can use it without having to create an account, but the same is true of Proton Authenticator.

Authy

www.authy.com

Authy used to be one of the best free authenticators, but last year it discontinued its Windows app and it doesn't let you import or export 2FA codes. We like that you can switch between a list and grid view, and easily copy codes to your clipboard. But we resent being pestered to turn on push notifications. ca

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Our experts solve all your tech problems

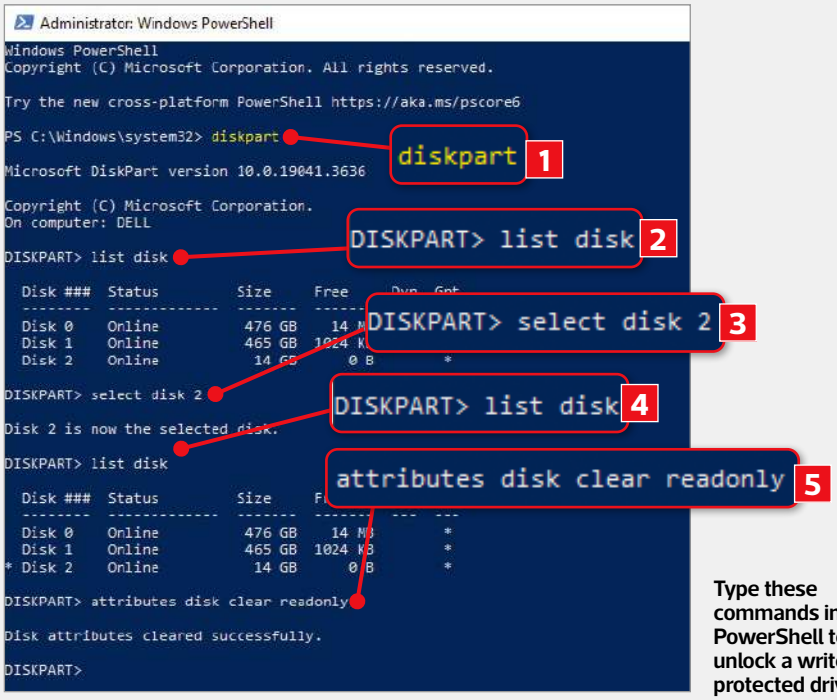
PROBLEM OF THE FORTNIGHT

How do I regain control of my USB stick?

Q I have a 128GB Kingston USB memory stick. Before upgrading my PC from Windows 10 to 11, I copied some files to the stick to ensure they were safe during the process. I also encrypted them somehow, but I didn't make a note of the method I used or the password, and now the stick seems unusable.

I'm not too bothered about losing the contents, but I'd like to be able to reuse the stick. I've tried several methods suggested by AI, but an error message tells me the drive is write protected. As a long-time reader of your excellent magazine, I can solve most of my computer problems but not this one. Can you help?

Stuart Bowld


Administrator: Windows PowerShell
Windows PowerShell
Copyright (C) Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.
Try the new cross-platform PowerShell https://aka.ms/pscore6
PS C:\Windows\system32> diskpart
Microsoft DiskPart version 10.0.19041.3636
Copyright (C) Microsoft Corporation.
On computer: DELL
DISKPART> list disk
Disk ### Status Size Free
Disk 0 Online 476 GB 14
Disk 1 Online 465 GB 1024
Disk 2 Online 14 GB 0 B
DISKPART> select disk 2
Disk 2 is now the selected disk.
DISKPART> list disk
Disk ### Status Size F
Disk 0 Online 476 GB 14
Disk 1 Online 465 GB 1024
* Disk 2 Online 14 GB 0 B
DISKPART> attributes disk clear readonly
Disk attributes cleared successfully.
DISKPART>
diskpart 1
DISKPART> list disk 2
DISKPART> select disk 2 3
DISKPART> list disk 4
attributes disk clear readonly 5

Type these commands into PowerShell to unlock a write-protected drive

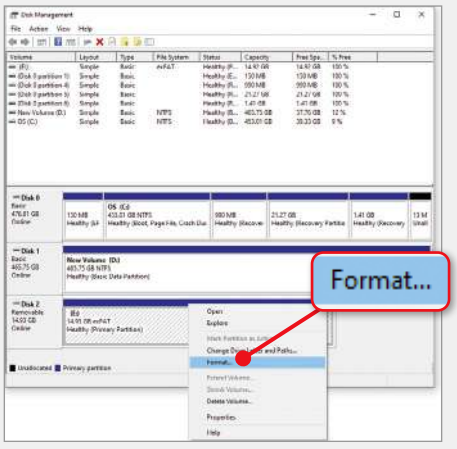
A Let's start with your files. Even if you knew the encryption method, they'd probably still be impossible to access without the password, and you don't know that either. So, unless you remember it, you'll have to write off your data.

You should be able to regain control of the USB stick, however. We don't know which methods you've tried, but it sounds as if the encryption tool you used set a digital read-only flag as a safety measure to protect against accidental data loss.

You can reverse this using PowerShell commands. Start by pressing Windows key+X to open the Quick Links menu. Then, depending on whether you're using Windows 11 or 10, choose either 'Windows Terminal (Admin)' or 'Windows PowerShell (Admin)'. Next, type diskpart (1 in our screenshot above right) into the box that appears and press Enter. Now type list disk (with the space 2) and press Enter again.

This will show all your connected drives. Use the information in the Size column to help you identify your USB stick, then note down the number alongside it. Next, type select disk X (with both spaces 3), replacing X with the correct drive number (for example, 'select disk 2'). Again, type list disk 4 and press Enter to check that you've selected the correct drive: it will have an asterisk (*) beside it.

To clear the read-only flag, type attributes disk clear readonly 5 and press Enter. Click the cross to close PowerShell, then open File Explorer by pressing Windows key+E. Now try formatting the stick in the usual way (right-click it and then choose Format – see screenshot below left).



Once the USB stick is unlocked, right-click it and select Format

If it's still locked, open PowerShell again and repeat the steps up to and including select disk X. Again, check that you've selected the correct drive by running list disk and looking for the asterisk next to its number. Once you're sure you've selected the correct drive, type clean and press Enter. This will instantly erase everything on the drive.

To finish, type create partition primary and press Enter. Then, depending on how you want to use the stick, format it by entering either format fs=exFAT quick or format fs=NTFS quick. NTFS is the best option for use with Windows PCs, because it provides better performance. If you want to use it in other devices too, exFAT is the safer choice because more systems support it.

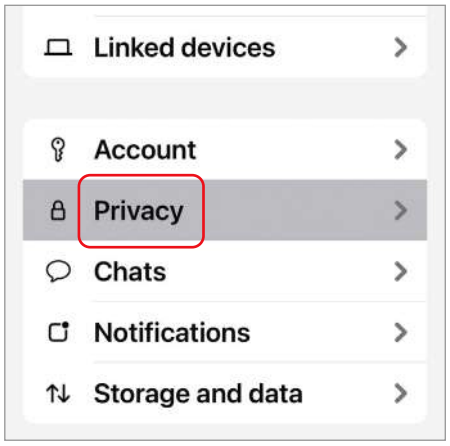
Why don't I see blue ticks on some WhatsApp messages?

Q I'm an elderly gentleman who just about gets by with modern technology. I use WhatsApp to keep in touch with various family members. My son set it up for me, but sadly he has since passed away. Over time I've worked out that the little ticks under messages I send turn blue when the other person has read them. However, I also receive replies from people who I know must have read my messages, but the ticks under these texts are grey. Do you know why this is? Have I misunderstood what the blue ticks mean?

John Godfrey

A You're talking about something called read receipts, and no, you haven't misunderstood how they work in WhatsApp. However, they are not entirely under your control.

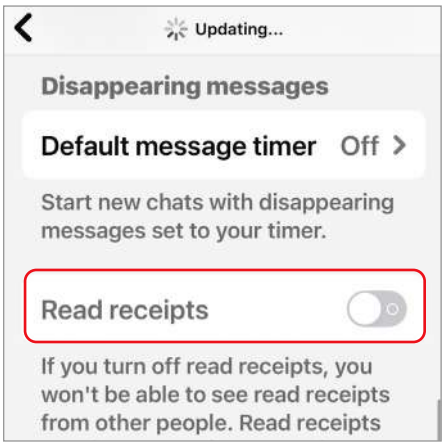
When you send a message, WhatsApp initially marks it with a single tick to indicate that it was sent successfully. Only when your contact has received it on their device will your phone show two ticks. As the period between sending and receiving is typically very short, you may not even have noticed that these ticks appear one at a time.



Open the WhatsApp app on your Android or iOS phone and tap Settings then Privacy

These ticks turn blue only when two other conditions are met. The first is that the recipient has read your message (or rather, they've opened the chat containing the message, because WhatsApp has no way of knowing if they've literally read your note). The second is that the recipient allows WhatsApp to send read receipts. It's these that tell your phone to turn the ticks blue.

By default, WhatApp is set to send read receipts. However, some users prefer to disable this feature for privacy reasons.


Updating...
Disappearing messages
Default message timer Off
Start new chats with disappearing messages set to your timer.
Read receipts
If you turn off read receipts, you won't be able to see read receipts from other people. Read receipts

Switch off 'Read receipts' so senders won't see blue ticks when you read their messages

If a contact has done this, the ticks under messages you send them will never turn blue, even if they read and reply to your message.

If you'd like to switch off read receipts in WhatsApp on your own Android or iOS device, first tap Settings followed by Privacy (see screenshot above left), then tap to switch off the 'Read receipts' slider (see screenshot above).

Now people who send you messages will no longer see blue ticks when you have read them.

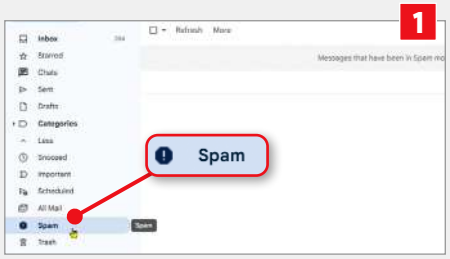
How do I keep 'More' options displayed in Gmail?

Q When I open Gmail, I can see a range of options on the left including Compose, Inbox, Sent and Drafts. Below these is a More link that I have to click to access my Spam folder. I have to check this daily to make sure no legitimate emails have been misidentified as spam.

I find this extra click annoying, so I'd like to set my Gmail inbox so the folders under More are always expanded.

I've looked for a way to do this, but I can't find one. Is it possible?

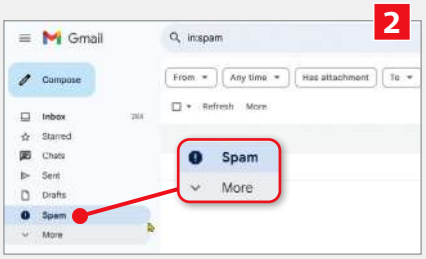
Niall Kavanagh



Expanding the More section in Gmail's sidebar reveals further options, including Spam

A Gmail doesn't have an option to expand the More section permanently, but a simple workaround will let you keep Spam and any other options under the More heading constantly visible. First, for the sake of clarity, we'd like to remind readers that Gmail doesn't have 'folders' as such. Rather, every message receives a label. These behave much like folders, but a message can carry one or more labels.

Clicking 'More' reveals the full list of



Drag any option from the More menu to the main section above for easier access

Gmail's own 'system' labels, including Spam (see screenshot 1). If you've created any labels of your own, they will appear below this list, under the heading Labels. You can move any system label, including Spam, into the area above the More link by dragging and dropping it, which will make it permanently visible 2. Note, however, that when More is expanded, the heading changes to 'Less' – so you need to drag Spam above the Less heading.

Should I replace my seven-year-old hard drive?

Q I bought a 2TB Seagate external hard drive about seven years ago. It still works well, but 2018 seems a long time ago in computer terms, so I'm wondering if I should update to an SSD? Many thanks for all the tips and recommendations!

Ann Moran

A That depends on what you use it for and which problem, if any, you're trying to solve. For weekly backups, say, a 2TB hard drive is as useful now as it was seven years ago. The task may take longer than it would using an SSD, but backups tend to run in the background, so does it really matter?

On the other hand, if you're working directly with large files or launching apps from the drive, switching to an SSD could give you a significant speed boost.

In other words, if your Seagate drive is holding up well and you're not feeling any speed constraints in day-to-day tasks, why replace it? But if speeds are an issue, any modern SSD, such as the pictured Crucial X9 model (starting from around £79, www.snipca.com/55610) will improve the situation.

An SSD such as this Crucial X9 model will always be faster than a hard drive

Can I get a Caps Lock key audio alert?

Q When typing a password, it's essential that I know whether I'm using upper- or lower-case letters, but often the typed characters are obscured by dots or asterisks.

Unfortunately, the Caps Lock key on my Logitech MK 320 keyboard doesn't light up. Many sites and services demand passwords with both upper- and lower-case letters, which only makes this problem worse.

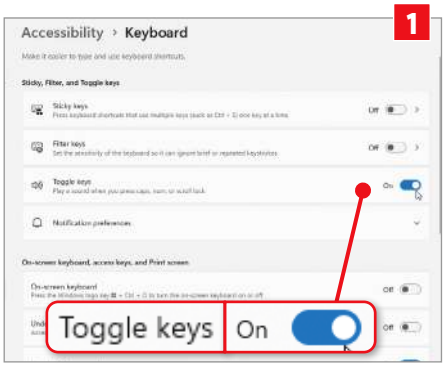
I seem to remember that years ago *Computeractive* created an app that plays a tone whenever Caps Lock is on. Is this still available? If not, is there another solution?

Clive Christy

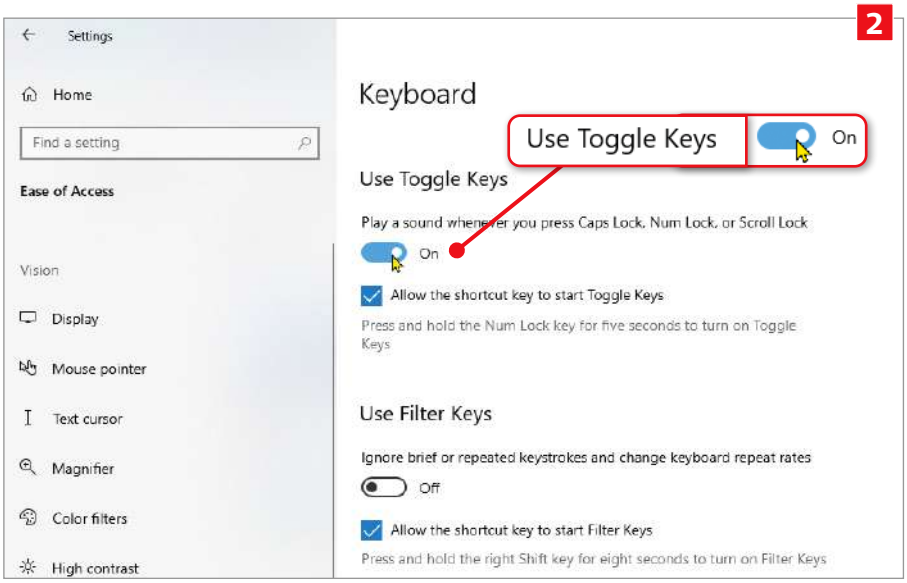
A We did indeed publish a little app called Caps Alert almost two decades ago. We're afraid it wouldn't run reliably on a modern computer. Thankfully, Microsoft eventually addressed this problem, so while our app is history, Windows now includes built-in options to alert you when the Caps Lock key is pressed.

First, click the Start button followed by Settings. Next, select Accessibility (Windows 11) or 'Ease of Access' (Windows 10), followed by Keyboard. Finally, in Windows 11, click to activate the 'Toggle keys' slider (see screenshot 1). In Windows 10, the same slider appears under the 'Use Toggle Keys' heading (see screenshot 2).

No, when you tap any of the Lock keys – Caps, Number (Num) or Scroll (Scr) – Windows will play a high- or low-pitched tone, indicating On or Off respectively.



In Windows 11, go to Accessibility, Keyboard and switch on the 'Toggle keys' slider


2
Settings
Home
Find a setting
Ease of Access
Vision
Display
Mouse pointer
Text cursor
Magnifier
Color filters
High contrast
Keyboard
Use Toggle Keys
On
Use Toggle Keys
Play a sound whenever you press Caps Lock, Num Lock, or Scroll Lock
On
Allow the shortcut key to start Toggle Keys
Press and hold the Num Lock key for five seconds to turn on Toggle Keys
Use Filter Keys
Ignore brief or repeated keystrokes and change keyboard repeat rates
Off
Allow the shortcut key to start Filter Keys
Press and hold the right Shift key for eight seconds to turn on Filter Keys

Switch on this slider in Windows 10's 'Ease of Access' to create an audio Caps Lock indicator

Q: Does BT use our routers as mobile hotspots?

A: Issue 688, page 67 – find it on our 2024 Back Issue CD

Buy it from www.snipca.com/53433

Can I add graphics card without changing motherboard?

Q I recently bought a Lenovo IdeaCentre 3 071RB8 PC (pictured right). I knew it didn't come with a graphics card, but assumed I could fit one later if I wanted. Having taken the side panel off the case, I see that the computer doesn't have a connector for a graphics card (pictured below right).

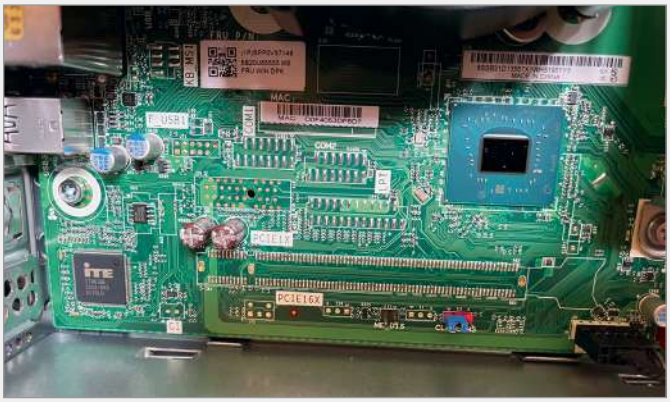
Am I correct in thinking it would be impossible to add a graphics card without also changing the motherboard? It has a standard Intel i7 processor so that wouldn't be a problem, but I thought all motherboards would have some sort of connection for a graphics card?

Charles Williams

Lenovo's small case design leaves little room for upgrades

A It was reasonable to assume you could add a graphics card to your new desktop PC, but Lenovo's design appears to have been motivated by keeping the cost and size down. Technically the motherboard could have accommodated a PCI Express expansion slot, but the company chose to save a few pennies per unit by not fitting this specific part. The only expansion ports are two M.2 slots, which are suitable only for SSDs, Wi-Fi modules and more. Your only option with this model is to rely on the Intel UHD Graphics hardware built into the CPU. Sadly, upgrading the motherboard isn't a practical option, because the case is Lenovo's own design, as is the power supply unit (PSU), which you would also need to upgrade to run a more powerful graphics card. Even if you could find a motherboard that fits, your choice of graphics cards would be limited to a handful of older, 'low-profile' models that might fit the smaller case.

In short, upgrading the motherboard, PSU and graphics is probably impossible. If you bought the PC only recently and were expecting otherwise, we'd suggest returning it.



With no PCI-Express slot, the Lenovo IdeaCentre 3 PC can't accommodate a graphics card upgrade

What is this HDD Reset button on my PC?

Q I bought a new Windows 11 desktop PC, which the vendor built partly to my own specification. When I unpacked it, I noticed a second, smaller button next to the Start button, with a red light that flashes for a short time. This is labelled HDD Reset. I've never seen a button like this before. I searched online, but I'm still confused. Can you tell me what it does?

David Osborne

The HDD/Reset labels refer separately to the indicator light and the little round button

A You mentioned unpacking the PC, so we're sure that by 'Start' button, you mean the Power button on the case – not the Windows Start button. That would also make sense in the context of a second button labelled 'HDD Reset' and a physical flashing light.

While you didn't tell us which specific make or model of PC you have, you said it's some kind of custom build. With all this in mind, we're confident that the vendor built your PC using a generic case that has an integrated Reset button, as well as a light that indicates hard disk drive (HDD) activity. So this label should actually read 'HDD/Reset' (pictured above). We suspect that if you look closely, this is what you'll see. Alternatively, they may be two distinct but adjacent labels, with 'HDD' above the light and Reset over the button.

Physical 'Reset' buttons aren't common these days but they do exist, especially on generic cases for custom PCs. If it's wired up (and it might not be), tapping it would briefly switch the PC's power off and on again. The HDD indicator, meanwhile, simply illuminates whenever the HDD is active.

How can I keep my laptop awake?

Q What can I do to make sure my laptop stays on while I get up to make a cup of tea, answer the door or do anything that takes more than a few moments? It's a Lenovo IdeaPad S540 with Windows 11.

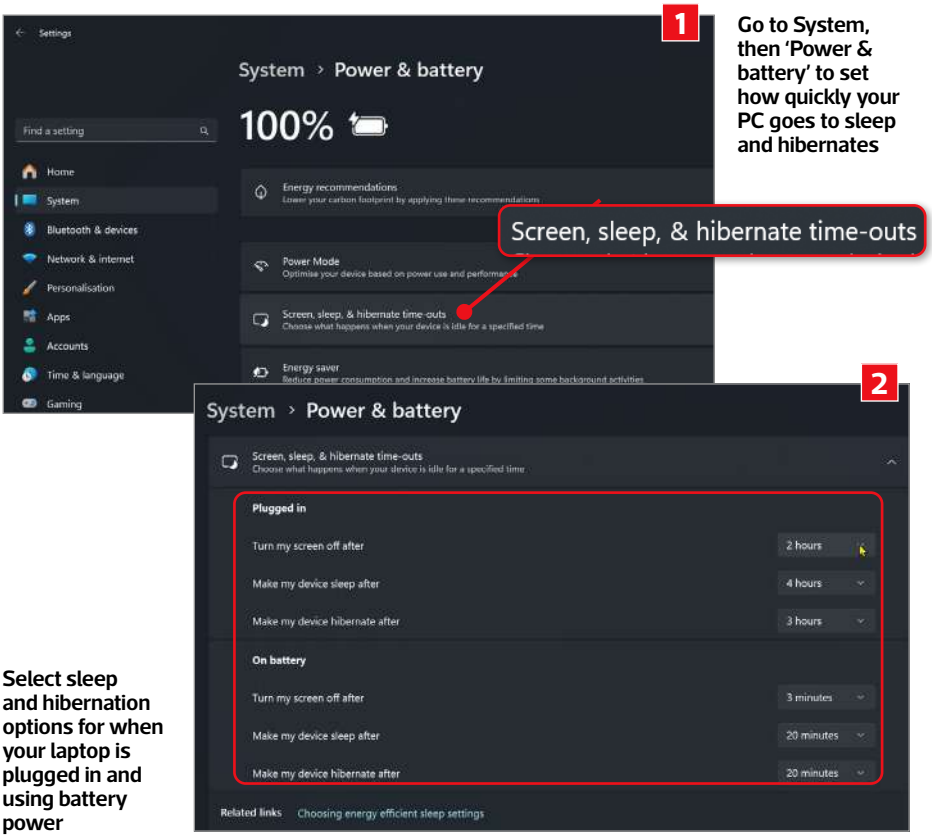
Brian Emery

A It's common for modern computers to switch off their screens automatically after a few minutes of inactivity, even when plugged into the mains. What's more, if you leave it longer, a Windows computer will typically enter a 'sleep' state. Both are simply energy-saving measures.

Either way, you can wake the machine by tapping a key or moving your mouse, and it usually comes back to life within a couple of seconds. If you leave it idle for an extended period your PC might even enter a 'hibernation' state, which consumes virtually no power but takes longer to wake from.

You'll be pleased to hear that you can customise all these behaviours. First, click the Start button followed by System then 'Power & battery'. Next, click 'Screen, sleep, & hibernate time-outs' (see screenshot 1).

Here, you can change the settings that determine when your screen switches off, and when the computer goes to sleep or enters hibernation. Just use the menus under the 'Plugged in' and 'On battery' headings 2 to set your preferences.



Go to System, then 'Power & battery' to set how quickly your PC goes to sleep and hibernates

Select sleep and hibernation options for when your laptop is plugged in and using battery power

Why does my drive appear twice in File Explorer?

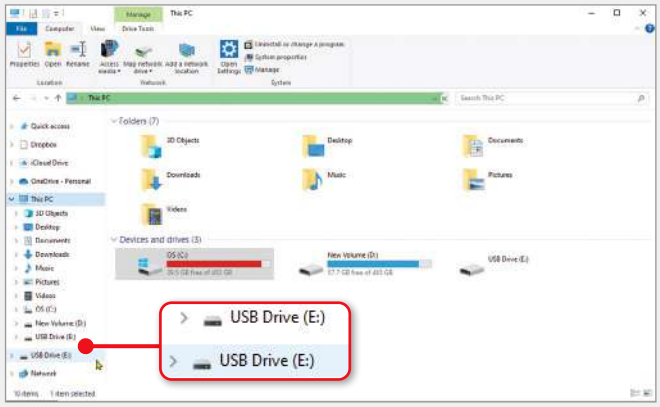
Q When I plug an external drive into my laptop and open File Explorer, it appears twice. Why is this, and can it be rectified?

Mick Hodgkiss

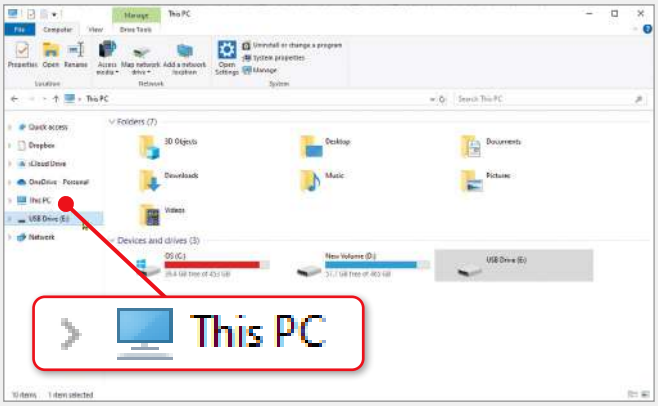
A This is actually normal for external drives, which appear both as distinct entries in File Explorer's left-hand navigation pane and then again under the heading This PC (see screenshot below left).

We're not sure Microsoft has ever explained why, but we think it's probably the convenience (and reassurance) of seeing a drive you've attached appear in the navigation pane. Because some people might prefer to keep the This PC category closed, having an external drive appear as its own entry when it's plugged in makes sense.

The quickest way to hide this apparent duplication is to click the arrow next to This PC (see screenshot below), hiding the group's contents and leaving just a single entry for your external drive.



External drives always appear twice in File Explorer's sidebar...



...to rectify this, simply hide This PC's contents by clicking its arrow

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN...

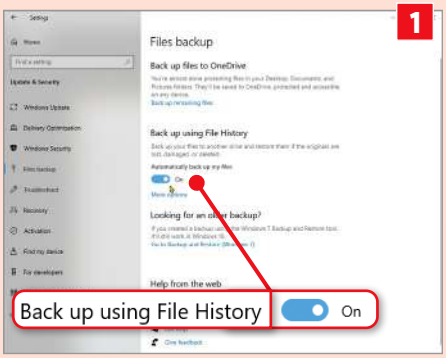
Backing up and copying?

Q You often remind readers to back up their data, but you don't really explain what you mean by that. Is there a specific program we should be using? For many years now, I've used File Explorer once a week to copy all my important files and folders from my laptop's drive to an external USB drive. Is this good enough as a backup? Or when you say 'create a backup', are you talking about something specific or different to what I'm doing?

Carl Benton

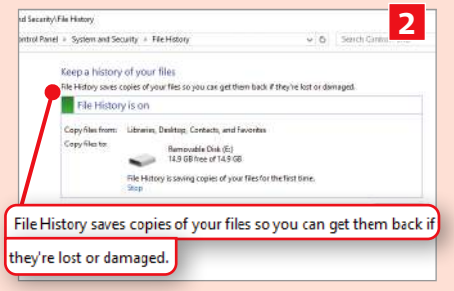
A This is a good question. When we advise readers to back up their data, we're usually speaking generally, and what you're doing certainly falls into that category. However, if we were pushed to make a distinction, we'd say the difference between backing up your data and simply copying files comes down to automation and redundancy.

Copying files manually, as you're doing with File Explorer, is certainly better than nothing. However, it relies on both your memory and self-discipline. In contrast, a dedicated backup system works automatically according to a schedule, and the user rarely needs to do anything.



Switch on this Windows setting to back up your files and system settings automatically

What's more, backup tools such as EaseUS Todo Backup and Windows' own File History tool (see screenshot 1) can make the process safer and more efficient, ensuring that only changed files are updated, for example, or backing up multiple older versions of files, which it can then restore easily if necessary 2. Such tools can save more than just your own personal files, too. You can save personal settings and so on, and restore them in the event of a digital disaster.


2
Keep a history of your files
File History is on
File History saves copies of your files so you can get them back if
they're lost or damaged.

Set File History to save multiple versions of your data in the location of your choice

A good system should also have built-in redundancy, which means keeping more than one backup, and preferably in different physical locations. That's not necessarily easy, but using an online-storage service such as OneDrive or Google Drive does the same job, as you can store your files and folders both on your own drives and a secure server on the internet.

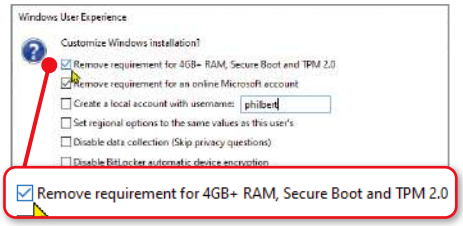
Want to know the difference between technical terms? Email noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Why can't I upgrade my refurbished laptop?

Q I recently bought a refurbished Dell laptop from an online seller, which had been upgraded to Windows 11. On receiving it I found the seller had used a workaround to upgrade it. I realise I should have done my research beforehand and checked if this particular model had compatible hardware. I was frustrated to find that it doesn't support the latest (24H2) build. *Computeractive* has warned many times that using a workaround to upgrade to Windows 11 could affect future updates. Is that the problem here?

Nigel Baker

A Microsoft can and does block newer versions of Windows 11 on PCs that don't meet its requirements (www.snipca.com/55544). There are workarounds that can bypass checks on such things as TPM 2.0, Secure Boot and a supported processor, but they don't guarantee access to future updates – as appears to be the case here.


Windows User Experience
Customize Windows installation?
Remove requirement for 4GB+ RAM, Secure Boot and TPM 2.0
Remove requirement for an online Microsoft account
Create a local account with username: philbert
Set regional options to the same values as this user's
Disable data collection (Skip privacy questions)
Disable BitLocker automatic device encryption
Remove requirement for 4GB+ RAM, Secure Boot and TPM 2.0

Ticking this option in Rufus may let you install the latest Windows 11 upgrade on an older PC

The seller probably used a program such as Rufus to upgrade your PC, and the same tool might get you out of your current hole. It's a free download from https://rufus.ie. Also, download the latest Windows 11 ISO file (24H2) from Microsoft at www.snipca.com/55545.

Now plug in a USB drive with 8GB of free space, launch Rufus and select the downloaded ISO file. Click Start in Rufus, then tick the 'Remove requirement for 4GB+ RAM, Secure Boot and TPM 2.0' box (see screenshot). Click OK, and Rufus will turn the USB stick into a bootable drive with Windows 11 modified to circumvent Microsoft's restrictions.

Restart your laptop with this stick plugged in and – with a bit of luck – 24H2 will install on your PC.

Next Issue

ON SALE **Weds 10 Sept**

- Can I move my old app and updates to a new PC?
- Can I get my old printer working?
- How do I secure a CCTV system? ...And many more

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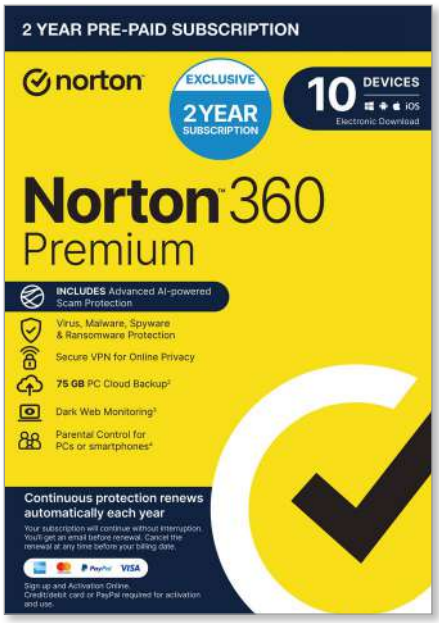

Norton is made by NortonLifeLock Inc – a standalone company dedicated to consumer cyber safety. It has always performed strongly in *Computeractive* antivirus tests, so we highly recommend it.

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*while stocks last

Reader Support

Having a problem with our recommended software or expert tips? Email **editor@computeractive.co.uk** and we'll do our best to help

Does hard-wiring a dashcam invalidate your car insurance?

Q In Issue 714's feature 'Hack your car's USB port' (page 60) you suggest hard-wiring a dashcam to your car using a £20 kit from Nextbase (www.snipca.com/55421). Shouldn't you have suggested informing your car's insurance company as they may deem it a 'modification' that could annul a policy?

Don Palmer

A Yes, that's an important point we should have mentioned. Many car-insurance policies require you to confirm any modifications made to your vehicle from its factory standard.

You can hard-wire dashcams in your car using kits like this but it might invalidate your insurance

Hard-wiring a dashcam might seem minor, but it involves tapping directly into your car's wiring, not just plugging into a ready-made socket. Failing to tell your insurance firm about a hard-wired dashcam, even if installed professionally, could invalidate your policy or complicate a claim if your insurer deems the modification relevant to an incident. They might, for example, argue it affected the electrical system.

Can I erase personal data from broken TV?

Q I wanted to wipe my personal data from my smart TV (Issue 710, page 56), but the screen shows a distorted rainbow effect that I can't get rid off. Is there another way to do this? Also, am I right in thinking someone could still access my TV by connecting with a USB to their laptop? If so, then I don't trust handing over my TV to be recycled.

Kevin Vine

A It could be tricky to erase data from a TV with a broken screen. Some TVs do offer a hard reset using physical buttons on the set itself, rather than the remote – but this varies by model, and usually still relies on some kind of screen menu. Search online for your exact make and model to see if it's possible, or contact the manufacturer.

Your concern about someone accessing your personal data by connecting your TV to a laptop via USB isn't entirely misplaced, but it's highly unlikely to happen through the TV's standard USB ports. These are designed for plugging USB drives, mice and keyboards into the TV – not for connecting it as a device to a computer. You can't simply hook up your TV to a laptop and see its internal storage like an external drive.

Accessing personal data stored inside a smart TV's built-in memory requires specialist tools and the physical removal of storage chips – something far beyond the reach of casual users.

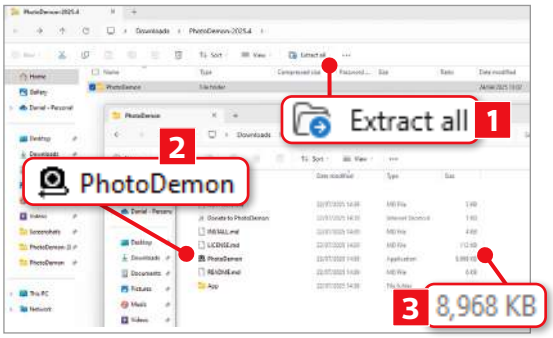
So, while it's smart to be cautious, the risk is very low. To be sure though, take it to a professional electronics recycler who can destroy all data on it.

Why can't I open PhotoDemon?

Q I tried to download PhotoDemon (www.snipca.com/55086), which you recommended in Issue 713's Cover Feature ('Best free software you'll master in minutes'), but I keep getting a message saying it's not possible to open it. Can you tell me where I'm going wrong?

Peter Ashton

A Your browser or security software might be blocking the download. If so, this is an instance of a false positive because PhotoDemon is completely safe. It's also possible you haven't extracted the ZIP file after downloading PhotoDemon. You have to do this because it's a portable program.



PhotoDemon is a portable program so you need to extract its files before running it

Download it from the link above then extract its files – either by right-clicking (in Windows 10) or selecting 'Extract all' (Windows 11, 1 in our screenshot above). Now browse to choose a folder to save the files in and click Extract. Once you've done so, open the PhotoDemon folder that appears (not the original ZIP folder) and double-click the PhotoDemon file 2. This will be the biggest file in the folder - 8,968KB or thereabouts 3. It should now open and run on your computer.

Did you get Amazon's buyer-protection period wrong?

Q When answering Charlotte Thomas's question in Issue 714's Consumeractive (page 14), you said Amazon has a buyer protection of 30 days. I thought it was longer than this. Can you clarify?

Dean Thomson

A Yes we can. Amazon gives you 30 days to reject an item for any reason (ie, it doesn't have to be faulty). This is longer than the 14-day 'cooling-off' period provided by UK law. But Amazon's buyer protection we referred to in our answer to Charlotte is actually 90 days after estimated delivery date, not 30. This is the company's 'A-to-Z Guarantee' (www.snipca.com/55647), and protects you if the item doesn't arrive, is damaged or isn't as described. Apologies for the confusion.

Jargon Buster

1080p High-definition video: 1920x1080 pixels.

4K Video with a resolution of at least 3840x2160 pixels.

Adobe RGB A wider colour space than sRGB.

AES-256bit A form of encryption based on a key length of 256 bits.

AMOLED Alternative technology to LCD for creating flatscreens.

Bandwidth How much data a connection can transfer at a time.

Benchmarking Comparing software and products with an accepted standard.

BIOS Software built into every PC that connects the vital components.

Bootable Describes a device or disc with system files on it so it can be used to start up your computer.

Buckling spring switch A type of mechanical keyboard switch most famously used in IBM's Model M keyboards.

Cache A temporary space for storing information.

Cast To send content from your PC to TV.

cd/m² Standard unit of brightness.

Chatbot An AI program designed to recreate conversation with humans.

Client A program that acts as an interface between PC and server.

Code Written instructions that tell software how to execute tasks.

Colorimeter A tool for measuring the colour accuracy of monitors.

Colour temperature How blue and yellow-orange combine to produce the overall colour of your monitor.

Cookie A small text file stored on your computer by a website.

Copilot+ An enhanced version of Microsoft's Copilot AI tool.

CPU Central Processing Unit. Another term for a PC processor.

Cryptocurrency A digital currency not backed by any country.

Dark web Websites that can only be accessed using special software such as the Tor Browser.

DCI-P3 A colour space that has a wider spectrum than sRGB.

DDoS A targeted cyber-attack that brings down a web server.

DisplayPort A socket for connecting monitors.

Distro A version of the Linux OS and the programs that go with it.

DNS A technology that associates computers with their addresses on the internet.

Domain These are used to identify one or more IP addresses.

Defragment To reorganise a hard drive's data so its files are stored in one piece, speeding up access.

Driver A file that tells Windows how to work with an external device.

Encryption key A random string of characters used to encrypt and decrypt sensitive data.

End-to-end encryption A way of encrypting messages so only the sender and recipient can read them.

Ethernet A standard used for almost all wired computer networks.

exFAT Microsoft's file system for USB sticks and SD cards.

False positive When an antivirus program wrongly detects a malware infection.

Fingerprinting A tracking method used by websites to identify you from the device and software you're using.

Fps Frames per second. Used to indicate gaming performance.

Freemium A business model where basic services are provided for free, while more advanced features must be paid for.

FTP A system for transferring files between computers.

GHz Gigahertz. A measure of how many instructions a chip can process per second.

Gorilla glass Scratch-resistant glass that's used to protect the screens of tablets and phones.

GPU A chip designed to create 3D graphics.

Graphics card A component in a computer that produces the image shown on the monitor.

HDMI Connection that transmits high-definition video and audio.

HEX A six-character code representing a colour.

HSL Colour model based on hue, saturation and lightness.

Hyperlink A clickable link that takes you to a document or website.

Hz Hertz. Measures the frequency something happens: 1Hz equals once a second.

IP68 A rating denoting resistance to dust, dirt and sand, and that the device can survive immersion in up to 1.5m of water for 30 minutes.

IP address A unique set of numbers used to identify computers and websites on the internet.

IPS A screen technology. Monitors that use it have wider viewing angles and more accurate colours.

ISO file A type of image file that contains data from a CD or DVD.

Keylogging Recording everything someone types. Normally used to steal passwords.

Large language model A type of artificial intelligence algorithm that analyses huge amounts of data sets to summarise and create content.

M.2 A standard specification for PC expansion cards and connectors.

mAh Milliamp hours. A unit that measures (electric) power over time.

Markdown A way of creating formatted documents using plain text.

Mesh Wi-Fi Wireless network system that uses multiple routers to stretch Wi-Fi over a wide area.

Metadata A set of data that gives information about a file.

Mirror To display on your TV what's on your PC or tablet screen.

MMS A system for sending images and sounds between phones.

MVNO A mobile provider that piggybacks on another network.

NTFS A file system used by all recent versions of Windows.

NTSC A TV standard used in America, Japan and others.

OLED A thin-film organic light-emitting diode used in computer displays and television screens.

Onion address URLs for websites on the dark web, accessible only through the Tor Browser.

Open source Software that can be modified by anyone.

Passkey A method for signing into accounts using a one-off code, fingerprint or facial recognition rather than a password.

PCI Express A slot on the motherboard for expansion cards.

Peer-to-peer A way to connect two or more computers so they can share and swap files.

Phishing A form of internet fraud that tries to trick you into revealing personal details.

Plain text Text in a document that doesn't contain any formatting.

Port forwarding Choosing which computer in your network a router should connect to.

PowerShell A Windows tool for automating commands.

Protocol The agreed standard for transmitting data between devices.

Proxy server A computer that sits between your computer and the internet and filters the connection.

PS/2 A small, round six-pin connector for plugging a keyboard or mouse into a computer.

Push notification A message from an app that appears on a phone or tablet, even when you're not using the app.

QR code A barcode that can be read using smartphones.

RCS A method of sending texts over phones with more features than SMS, such as photos and videos.

Read To access data saved on a computer.

Recovery key A password to access a locked account.

Refresh rate Measured in Hz, the number of times per second the image on your monitor is redrawn.

Refurbished A device that has been repaired by its manufacturer.

Remap To change the function of a key on your keyboard.

Rootkit Software that gives a hacker access to a computer.

RTF A file format used to transfer files between different types of word-processing programs.

SD card A type of memory card.

Secure Boot A security standard designed to make sure your PC avoids malware when booting.

SIM Subscriber Identity Module. The smart card used by all digital mobile phones.

S.M.A.R.T PC-testing technology.

SMS Short Message Service. More commonly called text messaging.

sRGB A standard RGB colour space for use on monitors, printers and the internet.

SSD Storage that, unlike a hard drive, uses no moving parts.

Tag A keyword used to describe a file or web page.

Temporary file Created by websites to store info for a specific purpose.

Throttle Intentionally slowing broadband speeds to manage congestion on a network.

Tor Browser A web browser designed for anonymous surfing.

TPM A chip that stores keys which encrypt data on your hard drive.

Transition A way of joining two video clips together.

Tri-band A router that broadcasts on 2.4GHz, 5GHz and 6GHz bands.

Trojan A malicious program that's disguised as a harmless one.

Two-factor authentication A system that uses two different means to identify the user.

UEFI A modern replacement for the BIOS.

Ultrawide Offering a field of view that's wider than digital cameras.

USB 2.0/3.0/3.1/3.2/4.0 Faster successors to USB.

USB-A The original type of USB connector, released in 1996.

USB-C A connector that's reversible.

VPN Virtual private network. Keeps all internet communication safe and private.

WebRTC Online tech that lets you have audio and video chats without installing plug-ins.

Wi-Fi 6 Wi-Fi standard with speeds up to 10 times faster than Wi-Fi 5.

Wi-Fi 7 Wi-Fi standard with an maximum speed of 46Gbps.

Widget A small program that runs on the Windows desktop.

Write Save data to a hard drive.

ZIP file A file that contains compressed documents or files.

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3	BT	Full Fibre 500	**£34.99** £38.99 from 31st March 2026	24 Months	**500Mbps** avg. speed	**£60** Gift Card	**£375.88**
4	3	5G Hub	**£17.00** £19.00 from 1st April 2026	24 Months	**150Mbps** avg. speed	**N/a**	**£212.00**

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Know How

Eager to run his favourite AI tool from his Fire TV Stick, **Robert Irvine** tries to...

Talk to ChatGPT on his TV

Over the past year, I've become a ChatGPT addict. I use it in my browser while I'm working (for research, not writing, I should stress) and in its mobile app while I'm relaxing. It's like having a clever friend who's always happy to help.

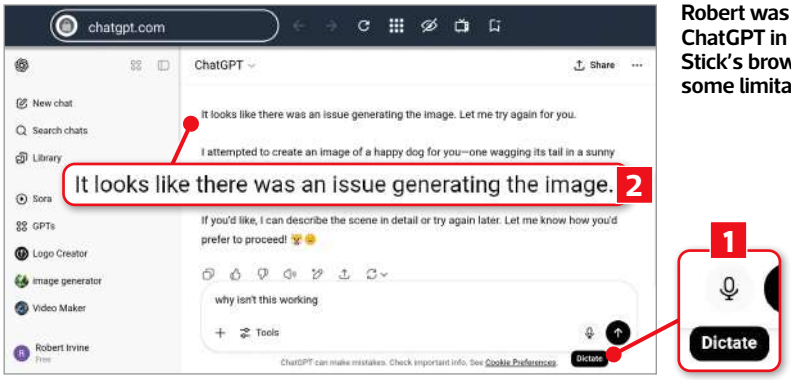
> Talking to ChatGPT using a TV remote is like sending semaphore signals with cocktail umbrellas

So when I read that Samsung TVs will soon have a conversational version of Samsung's voice assistant Bixby (www.snipca.com/55821), I wondered if I could access ChatGPT on my own TV – preferably installed on my Fire TV Stick, so I could use the chatbot on various large screens.

A quick search of the Amazon Appstore confirmed there is no official ChatGPT app for Fire sticks, nor is it available for any other streaming devices or smart TVs. However, there are some dodgy-looking rip-offs (sample review: "Horrible app, do not recommend").

So I sought an alternative means of accessing the AI assistant on my TV set. One option was to use the web-based version by visiting ChatGPT's website (www.snipca.com/55813) in Silk Browser, the built-in browser on Fire TV sticks. This presented me with the chatbot's familiar interface, where I was able to ask questions and get informative responses, just like on my PC or phone.

The problem was that typing with a TV remote is a world away from using a proper keyboard. It's fiddly enough just entering the name of a TV show or app. Trying to have a text conversation with ChatGPT by selecting on-screen letters individually is trickier than sending semaphore signals with cocktail umbrellas.

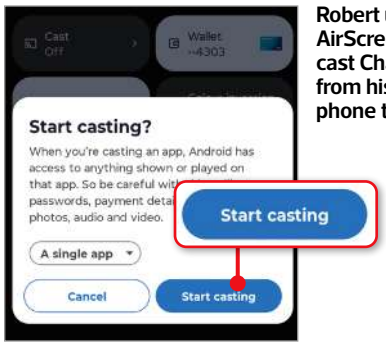


Robert was able to use ChatGPT in his Fire TV Stick's browser but with some limitations

The obvious solution was to use ChatGPT's voice mode to dictate my prompts rather than type them. To try this, I logged into my OpenAI account in the Silk Browser, which activated ChatGPT's full range of free features.

I selected the Dictate button (1 in our screenshot above) and granted ChatGPT permission to access the microphone on my Fire TV remote. This displayed a red error message saying 'Enable mic access to dictate', but when I pressed the remote's mic button to speak my command, my words appeared in ChatGPT's message box. Technically, I think I was using Alexa to dictate, but at least it saved me typing.

However, having to open the ChatGPT website in Silk Browser every time I want to chat isn't ideal, and still involves faffing around with the TV remote. Plus my request to generate a picture of a happy dog twice failed to produce anything 2, presumably because my Fire stick doesn't have enough processing power.


Start casting?
When you're casting an app, Android has access to anything shown or played on that app. So be careful with passwords, payment details, photos, audio and video.
Start casting
A single app
Cancel
Start casting

Robert used AirScreen to cast ChatGPT from his phone to TV

An alternative option occurred to me: why not mirror my phone's screen to my TV? This would give me all the speed and sophistication of the ChatGPT mobile app, on a much bigger canvas. More importantly, I'd have the convenience of a touchscreen keyboard to type my commands.

Typically, my Android phone doesn't support mirroring (only casting to Google devices), so I installed a free app called AirScreen (www.snipca.com/55819) on my Fire stick to get the feature. I scanned a QR code with my phone to connect the two devices and opted to cast only in-app content, not my entire screen.

Next, I swiped down from the top of my phone's screen and tapped Cast. I selected the AirScreen option and pressed 'Start casting' (see screenshot left). When the 'Share or record an app' screen opened, I chose ChatGPT and the AI assistant appeared on my TV. All its features – including image generation and voice mode – were available and I could happily type my prompts without struggling with the remote.

Hopefully, OpenAI will eventually launch a proper ChatGPT app for TVs, so I won't have to cast around.

Need help with ChatGPT? Let us know: noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Next issue: Robert tries to set up a private photo server

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